

The GOLD TRAIL



by
H. de Vere Stacpoole



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THE GOLD TRAIL

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CHAPTER I

MACQUART

DAY was breaking over the Domain, glorious, gauzy with mist, warm and blue.

The larrikins and loafers, drunkards and unemployed who had spent the night on the grass were scratching themselves awake. Houghton on a seat had ceased yawning and stretching himself. He was talking to a stranger, a man slightly over the middle age who had slept beside him, and who was now making his toilet with a bit of comb, running it through his hair and his grizzled beard and talking all the time in an easy, garrulous, voluminous manner, more suggestive of long intimacy than of total unacquaintanceship.

Houghton, who had awoken surly and stiff and out of temper with the world, was sitting now with his arm across the seat back, his legs crossed, and his foot swinging, listening to the other who was making the conversation, and wondering vaguely what manner of man he might be. He had never seen any one at all like him.

"And the strangest thing," went on the gentleman

with the comb, "is the fact that the off-scourings of the city sleep in this splendid place, fill their lungs with good air and wake refreshed, whilst the prosperous folk sleep in dog holes—bed rooms, if you like the term better—and wake half poisoned by their own effluvia. But don't think I am a crank. Oh, dear, no. When I am well off, I am just as tough to common sense as the rest of humanity. I sleep in a bed room, eat too much, drink too much, and smoke too much; but between whiles as now, for instance, when I am driven to the simple life I enjoy it, and I get a glimpse of what might have been if men had stuck to tents instead of building houses. Freedom, air, light, simplicity, great open spaces—those are the things that make life. Yes, sir, those are the things that count."

"You have been about the world a lot?" said Houghton.

The other, having finished his toilet, was now regarding his boots with a critical eye; one of them showed a crack where the upper met the sole at the instep. He made this crack open and shut like a mouth for a moment, viewed it with his head on one side, and then said:

"Almost all over the place. North, south, east and west, doing almost everything that has got excitement in it. Living, you may say—that's the word. How old may you be, if it's not an impertinent question? Twenty-three, and you are English, I can see that. You belong to the class they call in England the gentleman class, and you're out here sleeping with old rovers like me and all that hoggery over there

on the grass in the Domain of Sydney, without maybe more than a shilling in your pocket. Well, I was like you once, and if you keep on as you are going, you'll maybe one day be like me. Look at me. I am forty-seven years of age, or maybe forty-eight, for I've always gone by dead reckoning—and I haven't lost a tooth, I could digest an ostrich, I haven't a care in the world and I'm always alive because I'm always interested. I have made three fortunes and lost them. Now *do* you think I set out to make those fortunes with a view to sitting down on the Hudson or on Nob's Hill or in the city of Paris or London and enjoying them? I never had a view to that. I never had a view to a palace and a fat woman covered in diamonds for a wife, and sons and daughters and all such like. No, sir, I fought for money for the fight of the thing. Money! I love it; it's my dream; I hunt for it like a pig for truffles, but when the durned thing is in my hands it turns to lead if I don't use it to make more, and that's what breaks me. For I'm like this, lucky as you like when I'm on the make adventuring in out-of-the-way places, but unlucky as Satan when I'm speculating. For instance, I made a big pile over the Klondyke and lost every cent in the wheat pit at Chicago.

"I was going about Chicago on my uppers same as I'm going about Sydney now, had to accept a loan to get away, then I bought an island."

"You bought an island?"

"To speak more truly, I bought the lease of one. You can buy islands, mind you, and if you knew the Pacific as I do, you'd open your eyes at the trades

that have been done over islands in these seas. There's Ten Stick Island, for instance, in the New Hebrides. It's nothing much of a place, just a rock sticking up out of the sea. You Britishers wanted a target for gun practice, and they bought the durned thing for ten sticks of tobacco from the Chief who owned it. At one time big fortunes were made by fellows who came along and picked up islands and stuck to them, shell lagoons and copra islands; but nowadays the governments have all closed in on everything bigger than a mushroom, even bits of places like Takutea and God-forsaken mud banks like Gough Island have their owners. Well, the island I came to negotiate for was in the New Hebrides. It was valuable because its top part was one solid block of guano. An old whaler captain brought news of it to me. I met him in a bar just off a cruise. 'But where's the use,' said he. 'It belongs to the Australian Government, and at the first wind of guano they'll close down on it.' That was four o'clock in the afternoon, and by four o'clock next day I had got a syndicate together, and not long after we had a lease of the place for ten years for almost nothing. And when we got to the place to work it, it was gone, nothing but a vigia left. Islands go like that. Kingman Island and Dindsay Island and a hundred others have ducked under, leaving only a reef a'wash or leaving nothing. Well, there we were—done, with long faces and empty purses—— Gimme a match."

He took out a pipe and some tobacco wrapped up

in a scrap of the *Sydney Bulletin*. Houghton supplied him with a match and he began to smoke.

Houghton was young for his years. He had left Oxford without a degree to spend two thousand pounds which came to him on his majority. A woman had helped him to spend the two thousand and had died of galloping consumption, leaving him broken and heart-broken at the same time, without a profession, with expensive tastes and no earthly means of making money save with his hands.

And you cannot make money with your hands in England, so he came to the Colonies, fell in with some bar acquaintances, risked his last penny on a horse race and lost. He had rooms in Sydney and some gear, but he could not pay his rent, he owed for board and lodging, and for the last two days had been living from hand to mouth. No one need starve in Sydney, it is the most tolerant city towards loafers in the world, not that Houghton was a loafer; he was just a man without a job.

He sat looking at the other for a moment, then he said, "My name is Houghton. I'm English, as you say. What are you—American?"

"No, *sir*," replied the stranger, "there's no American about me. I'm the most thoroughbred mongrel that ever crawled on God's green footstool and jumped for scraps. Macquart is my name. Simon Macquart, a prospector by nature and profession, and as you see me sitting here talking to you I don't look much, maybe, but I'm out after a fortune. A dead sure thing. Money enough to make a dozen men rich."

He stopped short and puffed at his pipe, his eyes fixed away towards the sea as though the fortune had suddenly materialised itself and were visible. His profile seen like this hinted at a character both daring and predatory. Remember that a man's essential character is exhibited in his profile more surely than in any other outline or combination of outlines, and the character of Macquart spoke loud at that moment as he sat with the pipe firmly clenched between his teeth and his eyes straining towards the distance.

"What is it?" said Houghton, "a mine?"

"Mine!" said the other, returning from his thoughts. "Oh, lord, no! It's a proposition, and this very morning I am going to lay it before one of the biggest bugs in Sydney. I've been carrying it about in my skull for a matter of two years, always hoping to be able to find money of my own to work it with—— Couldn't. Laid hold of it first up there, Borneo way—never mind exactly where, reached Portuguese Timor and sounded one of the biggest men there, a Dutchman, he only laughed at me—d—d ijit. I was so broke there that I had to help lading ships with copra—they've taken to growing cocoanut palms in Timor. Then I took a voyage to 'Frisco for my health, in the foc's'le. Had no luck in 'Frisco and drifted to Valdivia. There I nearly had a chance in a loose way of business; started a faro table with a Spaniard, and was piling up the chips when my partner scooped the pile and the police did the rest. Lord, I never was so beat as that time. I got a boat that took me to Liver-

pool. I did not want to go to Liverpool a bit, but the boat did and as I was one of the hands I had to go with her."

He tapped the dottle out of his pipe against his boot heel, and as he did so Houghton caught a glimpse of the fluke of a blue anchor tattooed on his wrist and exposed by the stretching of his arm. It was the only thing about the man suggestive of the fact that he had been a sailor.

"From that I worked back to New York," he went on, "and from New York here and there till I arrived in the old Colony, *always* with an eye on my proposition and another eye out for a suitable man to lay it before. I was near giving up when I fell in with a likely chap, a gentleman born; met him in a bar on Market Street, cottoned to him at once, just as I've done to you, gave him a whisper of what was in my mind and set him alight with it. He's in the swim here though he hasn't much money of his own. Bobby Tillman's his name, and he's going to lay me and my proposition before a likely man this very morning; eleven o'clock's the hour. If we can fix things up, Tillman is the man to collect the hands for the job and find a likely vessel; he's in with all the waterside. Money is useful in a thing like this, but it's the men that pull it through; get the wrong ones and you're done."

"Look here," said Houghton, "I don't know what this job of yours may be, and I don't want to be inquisitive, but it seems adventurous and you seem to want men. Would there be any show for me in it?"

"And why not?" asked Macquart, "if you're game for roughing it. 'Pears to me I've been telling you a lot of things I wouldn't have told to a casual stranger. Well, it's just because I seem to cotton to you. Mind now, and don't be flying away with things, building up on a treasure venture as if there was a fortune for every one in it; there's not that. There's the chap with money to be considered, there's me and there's Tillman. But you'd have your share and you'd see things, and maybe you'd be better off than on any job likely to turn up in Sydney. Can you handle a boat?"

"I've done a good deal of yachting in a small way."

Macquart laughed.

"That's the English all over," said he, "bred up in idleness and sport, and then, when the pinch comes, in out-of-the-way places the sport helps them through. And I suppose you know the which end of a gun?"

"Yes, I'm a fair shot."

"You'll do all right. Oh, I reckon you'll do all right, if we can only collar the bug with the money, which is my business, though maybe you can help a bit in that, too. I'm not much to look at, but your clothes are all right; you only want a wash and a brush up to be the English gentleman new to the colonies. There's nothing like a bit of good appearance to help a deal through. Tillman is good enough, but he's a bit off the handle. His father was a big marine store-dealer and he died worth a good deal; left his pile to Bobby, who spent half of

it and was choused out of the rest—or nearly so, for he's got a bit left, not much but enough to keep him idle—— Well, shall we get a move on? I'm going to a place I know for some breakfast—have you any money?"

"Two shillings," said Houghton, without any shame in stating the fact of his destitution.

"Well, keep your money in your pocket. I'll pay. I have a tick at the place I know. You'll want something for drinks, maybe, and I expect by to-night we'll be a durned sight better off if I can touch this chap with the money."

They left the Domain and entered the city. The morning was now blue and blazing, the streets brilliant with sunlight, and Houghton, walking beside Macquart, felt a wonderful uplift of mind and spirit.

Macquart was practically a tramp, though better dressed than the ordinary hobo; a man without money or home or prospects, yet of such an extraordinary personality that in his companionship all these details of life seemed of little account. This dreamer of wealth had the power of inspiring others with his dreams—or his disease. With him something wonderful was always going to happen, a sure thing that would shower gold on himself and his companions. Given a man with a grain of imagination and placed long in the company of Macquart, and that man would be lost—or at least his money would be lost, but at least he would have had excitement for his money, fabulous dreams of wealth, and the vision of a gorgeous future.

Houghton was under this spell now. Macquart

had told him quite definitely that his—Houghton's—share in the Venture would be small; that did not matter, the Venture was the main thing, the atmosphere of romance and new life that Macquart was able to cast around him without any effort, the spirit of youth he was able to conjure up to assist in his infernal projects.

No man can influence without himself being influenced; no man can make others feel what he does not feel himself. Macquart's whole-hearted enthusiasm in pursuit of his own ideals, his genuine joy in their pursuit, and his abandonment to imagination were the factors no doubt of his success. The old clothes that covered this walking romance were forgotten by them who read him, the dubious morality hinted at in his physiognomy was passed over; the fact that he was a walking parable on Poverty was unheeded—he showed men Fortune, talked of her as his mate, and made them believe.

He made me believe in him, and despite reverses, despite losses, despite the extraordinary happenings here to be set down, I believe in him still. He had without any manner of doubt the true scent for gold and success, a scent faultless when uncrossed and unspoiled by his imagination.

He led the way past the post-office and town-hall, of which splendid buildings he seemed as proud as any Sydneyite, and then, expatiating on the palms growing in front of the latter building, on the tramway traffic of the streets and the general prosperity of the city, led on down a bye-way to the doors of the modest-looking café where he possessed a tick.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITHOUT IMAGINATION

AT ten o'clock, Macquart leading the way, they entered Lamperts' bar at the corner of Holt Street. Lamperts' is the most extensive and expensive place of its kind in Sydney, and that is saying a good deal. After and before a race-meeting it is crowded, and it is said that more money is made and lost here than on the Wool Exchange. Here you may meet a great many notabilities, from the men who write and draw for the first paper in the Eastern Hemisphere to the man who has won the ——. Lamperts' has known Phil May, his pictures are on the walls; and it was towards a young gentleman contemplating one of these pictures that Macquart now advanced.

Tillman, for it was the redoubtable Bobby Tillman himself, turned at the footstep of the other, recognised him and taking his cigarette from his mouth gave him greeting.

Tillman looked about eighteen, he was in reality twenty-seven; fresh complexioned, clean-shaved, and well-dressed in a suit of blue serge, wearing a straw hat on the back of his head and his hands in his trousers' pockets, he was a typical "boy."

Every race-course knew him, every bookmaker

had made money out of him; he had spent a little fortune on dissipation, yet he remained to all intents and purposes quite fresh, innocent, and young.

Houghton took a liking at once to this new acquaintance, and having been introduced by Macquart as, "My friend, Mr. Houghton, just arrived from England," found himself leaning against the bar counter, a soft drink at his elbow and his attention entirely occupied by Tillman, who was talking to Macquart yet including him in the conversation.

"What I like about you is your punctuality," he was saying. "A man who doesn't keep his appointments is a man who, ten to one, doesn't keep his word. Well, here's to you."

"Here's to you," said Macquart; "and how about the business?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Tillman. "I saw Curlew again last night and reminded him. We are to be at his office at eleven sharp; he's interested and that's the great thing. Does your friend know anything of the affair?"

"Enough to make him want to lend a hand," replied Macquart, half turning towards Houghton. "He can't put any money into the thing——"

"Not a cent," cut in Houghton, with a laugh.

"But he's a yachtsman," went on Macquart, "and a good shot and used to roughing it—just the man we want."

"Good Lord! I should think so," said Tillman enthusiastically. "Blow the money; a good man is better than riches in an affair like this; strength in the after guard is what we want and chaps that

aren't afraid of the weather. Houghton, I'll be glad to have you with us."

"I've told him that the pay won't be great as viewed in proportion to the takings," said Macquart.

"There you go," cried the enthusiastic Tillman, "talking of pay as if you were going to open a fried-fish shop. What comes to us will be shared in proportion to what we do or what we put into the business. You see, in a safe land show it's all very well talking of salaries, but in an affair where we all risk being eaten by fishes or chewed by tigers, shares is a better word than salaries."

The word "tigers" made Houghton look up.

"There aren't any tigers," said Macquart; "tree cats and leopards, nothing worse."

"I don't want to ask too many questions," said Houghton, "or make you give the show away before you want to, but would it be too much to ask where we are going?"

"Mean to say you don't know?" cried Tillman.

"Not in the least."

"Well, you take the biscuit. You do, indeed. By George, that's the spirit I like, ready to sign on, maybe for Hades, without a question!"

Mr. Tillman did not say Hades. I doubt if his classical knowledge included the meaning of the word. He clung to the Anglo-Saxon, and Houghton laughed.

"I'd just as soon sign on for there as stay in Sydney without a cent in my pocket," said he, "and it couldn't be hotter."

"Well, it's not far from here we are going," said Tillman. "It's up north."

"New Guinea," put in Macquart.

"Up a river in New Guinea to find something that's there," said Tillman. "You'll hear it all when Macquart spins his yarn to Curlewis—— Well, shall we be going? It's some way from here, and it's no harm to be a bit before time."

He led the way out of the bar and they passed down the street, Tillman saluting nearly every second person they met. He seemed to be a well-known character and the greetings he received—so Houghton fancied—spoke of amiability and good-fellowship rather than high respect. Houghton's interest in this strange budding venture was concentrated now less on the main than the immediate objective. How would Curlewis receive his irresponsible visitor? How would he receive the seedy Macquart? He felt himself to be a fifth wheel in this ramshackle chariot so boldly setting out on the road to riches, and outside the wool broker's office he frankly said so, suggesting that he should wait in the street till the interview was over.

Mr. Tillman would have none of that. He declared Houghton's presence to be an indispensable factor in the proceedings. He was one of the "crew," well, why should he skulk in the street whilst the others were putting in hard work?

"Hard work—by Gad, all the rest will be nothing to this—*raising* money, why, it will be more like lifting it. I tell you, we have to carry this chap by assault; he's as good as they make them, but y'see

they made him a business man and that's the worst sort. However, we'll do it, if only Screed isn't there. Screed's his partner, hard as nails, no ideas about anything but wool—— Well, come on."

They entered the building, found Curlewis' office, and were ushered right into the great man's private room.

Curlewis was standing with his back to the empty stove. He was a joyous and opulent-looking young man of some thirty years, immaculately dressed, easy-going, an optimist and enthusiast by birth, judging from all appearances. Houghton, at sight of this gentleman, felt his spirits rising. Here was surely a man to further adventure, or, at least, not to cast cold water on the adventurous.

He scarcely noticed a mean-looking man like a clerk seated at the desk near the window, till he heard Curlewis say in answer to Tillman: "Oh, Screed won't be disturbed by you; he's busy with his letters and he has no ears or eyes for anything else. Chatter away as much as you like. Be seated, gentlemen. Well, now, this proposition of yours; let's hear it. Go into the thing right from the beginning so that I may have the lie of the whole matter, and take your time over it so that you may miss nothing important—— I'm not busy this morning."

"Ay, but I am," said Screed, in a half-grumbling voice.

"Well, then, shall I take them into another room?" replied his partner. "You said talking didn't interfere with you."

"Neither does it. I was only telling these gentle-

men that Curlewis and Screed aren't so short of business that both partners can indulge in a fool's holiday whenever it suits their pleasure."

Houghton thought he had never in all his life met, heard of, or imagined a more unpleasant person than Screed. Hard, material and practical, a living ledger, soulless as an inkstand, with no more imagination than a ruler. Houghton fancied him sitting there, placed by Fate as a living antithesis to the opulent, easy-going, imaginative Curlewis.

He saw in Screed the rock on which their venture might split, and he hated Screed accordingly.

But Tillman was talking now:

"Well," said he, "we'll get to business, then, at once, and if this is a fool's holiday, maybe we'll prove we're not such fools as we look."

"Tillman," put in Macquart, now speaking for the first time, "there's no manner of use in blowing a man's own trumpet in the first lines of a prospectus. Whether we're fools or whether we're not doesn't matter a row of pins if the proposition is a good one. I'd a durned sight rather be led to a fortune by a fool than stick round making a living under the guide of a wise man." Then turning to Curlewis: "I'm the head and front of this business, and looking at me you might say, 'Here's a nice sort of chap to come talking of fortune—why, he's broke.' Well, maybe I am; but if I am, it's because I have been going about with knowledge in my head that's worth more than the fools who won't listen to me will ever make in business. Did you ever see a prospector who wasn't broke till he managed to make good and

hit the stuff he was after? Well, the long and the short of it is, I'm after John Lant's treasure and I mean to lift it."

"John Lant?" said Curlewis, tentatively.

"The same," replied Macquart. "You don't know who he is—or who he was, to speak more properly. Well, he was one of the chaps who used to trade from Sydney in the old days. It's not so very long ago either, but long enough to have covered his traces. You look up the records of Sydney and see the business they used to do up there North before Borneo was properly settled down. Rubber, and wax, and trepang, and birds' nests and rice and opium, and the Lord knows what all; gold, too, from the upper rivers, though by all accounts not much. Anyhow, there was the trade to be had for old guns and gin, and gunpowder to be sold to the Malays that were fighting the Dutch, and sold at five hundred per cent profit.

"Then there were all sorts of side shows in the way of Barratry and Piracy and back-side ways of swindling, and Lant was up in every one of them, *every* one of them—— Thank you, I don't mind if I do."

Curlewis had taken a box of cigars from a side table, and was offering the narrator a smoke. The box was passed round and Houghton lit up cheerfully. Curlewis was evidently interested; only the infernal Screed, who evidently was a non-smoker, remained outside the charmed circle, and the occasional scratching of his pen could be heard like a comment on the words of Macquart.

"Every one of them," continued the Prospector, "and the tricks he didn't find to his hand he invented; and the ones he found he embroidered on. Well, he went like that laying up the chips, till one day he had a dust up with the Dutch Government; and what he'd done I don't know, but the Dutch Government confiscated his property. He'd invested his plunder in land at Macassar, and land in other parts owned by the Dutch. They say there was a big gambling shop in Macassar owned by him; anyhow, all his savings were under the thumb of the Dutch. You see, he'd been doing so many shady things, I expect he didn't like to have ownings where the British Government could touch them, which proves he was a fool, for the British Government is the best friend to a chap like that who has money enough to work the law. The Dutch Government didn't bother about the law; they knew he was a rogue and they scooped his property.

"It was when he called at Macassar with his ship that he got the news, and they impounded the ship. They impounded him and his crew, too, in an old calaboose place. He had stepped right off the blue sea into blue ruin, but that did not check Lant. He got wind in prison one day that a Dutch ship from Amsterdam had just come into the roads and that she was loaded up to her hatches with specie, to say nothing of general cargo. The *Terschelling* was her name. It was during the rains, and Lant and his men broke out of the calaboose that night, rowed off to the *Terschelling* and boarded her, shouting out

'Customs' to the chap that was on duty. He flung them a ladder to help them on board.

"Well, sir, I can tell you it didn't take long for those fellows to do their work, the anchor watch being below sheltering from the rain and wind, all except the man who'd helped them aboard. They clapped the foc's'le hatch to, stunned the look-out man and shoved him in the lee scuppers, knocked the shackle off the anchor chain and loosed the topsails, all before you could say 'knife.' Lant and his crew were handy men, and they had that brig away like picking a purse from a pocket, and there was nothing to chase them; the Dutch gunboat on the Macassar station was poking about after pirate praus on the Bornean coast, and the biggest bit of piracy ever done in those waters going on right before Macassar. It all fell in like a tune, besides, no one wanted to chase them, for no one knew till the next morning when sun-up showed the *Terschelling* gone.

"All the same, Lant would have been had most certainly and surely if he'd been an ordinary man; for where could he have taken the *Terschelling*? What port in God's earth could he have taken her to, she smelling of Schiedam and Amsterdam a mile off, with all her papers made out in Dutch and the very timbers of her shouting her nationality. No, sir, it couldn't be done. And then the specie. How could he have dealt with that? What would the Customs have said? You can fancy him getting those treasure chests ashore in any harbour, can't you, just 'bout as easy as you can fancy a dromedary playing a fiddle. Well, Lant knew better than that; he knew of

a river on a certain coast, a river that came down and disembogued itself among coral reefs and sea lagoons, places where the Chinese go for trepang and where the pirate praus used to wash up and brush themselves after a fight, and he knew the chaps who were chief men there, for he had traded with them and fought with them till they were all as friendly as the members of a Baptist tea-party when the Sally Lunn's are going round.

"You see, gentlemen, the Malays and the Sea Dyaks have their vices no doubt, but they're not wild animals any more than you and me. They have lots of straight in them, and once you have got their confidence by punching their heads, you can depend on them so long as you act straight by them.

"Now this river I'm speaking of was not situated in Borneo, as I've told Mr. Tillman. It was and is situated on the New Guinea coast. The people that live on its banks aren't New Guinea folk but Sea Dyaks from Borneo. What drove those Sea Dyaks to colonise a New Guinea river, I don't know, but there they are, like a plum graft planted on an apple tree, as you may say.

"Lant brought the *Terschelling* in here, telling the Dyaks that she was a new ship of his, and he got her up that river by warping and kedging till she was lying safe and sound in one of the upper reaches, with the mangroves brushing her yard arms and the monkeys playing the fool in her rigging, brought her up to the steep bank same as if it had been a quay side.

"The rains were on, as I said, and that gave him

very deep water, though it didn't need the rains, for these rivers are scoured out deep and always have a big command of water. Some of the biggest hills in the world are in the middle of New Guinea and one of the finest lakes, too.

"Lant told the Dyaks that he was tired of sea roving and had come to live among them for a while. He had got such a name for fighting that they almost looked on him as an immortal, which he pretty near was, for he was riddled with bullet wounds like a sieve yet as full of life as a grig. I reckon he was the sort of immortal a crocodile is.

"Well, Lant played up to that game, and the cargo of the *Terschelling* being of no manner of use to him, he makes huge presents to the chief men, and by night on the sly he gets his cases of specie ashore and caches them. The value of that specie ran to, roughly, half a million as counted in English gold coin, or pretty near seven tons of gold."

Macquart paused for a moment to deal with his cigar, and let the statement sink into the intelligences of his audience.

Curlewis alone spoke.

"You are pretty precise," said he. "Yet all that happened, as you say, a good while ago."

"Wait till I've finished," said Macquart, "and you'll see I'm speaking by the book.

"Lant, having cleared everything of worth out of the *Terschelling*, set alight to her by accident and that's the blackest bit of the business, for it seems she caught fire while the crew was aboard, and some-

how or another the foc's'le hatch had been fastened, so the whole lot were fried——”

“Good God!” said Curlewis. “Why, this chap murdered them.”

“Seems like it,” said Macquart; “but one man of them escaped, a fellow to whom Lant had taken a fancy; he was a sprightly chap and Lant’s right hand, and so he escaped.

“Well, Lant settled down among the Dyaks, waiting till things had blown over in Macassar and his name was forgotten, and he fell into the life there and grew lazy and took a wife to pass the time. The young fellow he had saved from the crew didn’t like this; he fancied, and rightly enough, that Lant was done for, sprung in the initiative and grown fat in the intellect; besides, Lant began to treat him as a subordinate. Besides, he had a wish for that lump of specie all for himself, and Lant didn’t give him even the promise of a sniff in. Besides, one day Lant’s Dyak wife presented him with a baby. Chaya was the wife’s name and Chaya they called the girl, and the young fellow saw that with a family growing up his chance of the specie was growing smaller, so he fixed it in his mind to do Lant in.”

“What was that young fellow’s name?” suddenly asked Curlewis, with his eyes steadily fixed on Macquart.

The question brought the tale-teller up all standing. He hesitated a moment.

“Smith was his name. Or let us call him Smith, for I’m not free, under promise—though he’s dead now—to give the real thing. We’ll call him Smith.”

"Go on," said Curlewis.

"Well, this Smith, he fixed it in his mind to do Lant in, and so it happened. Lant one day disappeared. He'd kept his dignity with the Dyaks and his distance, so that they still believed in him as a sort of God, not a real God, you'll understand, but an *Atu Jalan*. White people among the Dyaks had the name once of being *Atu Jalans*, sort of spirits returned from the dead. They thought Lant had gone a trip to heaven or somewhere, and would return, sure.

"Well, Smith found himself free of Lant, but he hadn't reckoned on Lant's wife, Chaya. There's nothing more sure than that women and dogs hunt by scent, and have some means of finding out things that men don't suspect. Anyhow, Lant's wife took a down on Smith. You see, *she* didn't think Lant a god for the very good reason that he was her husband, and she suspected Smith of having done him in, and she got up a yarn about him, said he had witched her baby, which was only three months old then, and she got lots of believers. They had never cottoned to Smith from the first, and they went for him, and he escaped down that river by the skin of his teeth—that was fifteen years ago. He got off in a prau and was picked up by an English ship, but he'd taken with him the bearings of the cache and the chart of just where it was. Much good they did him.

"Three years he knocked about the world, and then he had a dust-up somewhere in the French colonies and killed a Frenchman and got sent to Nou-

mea for life. He was stuck there seven years and escaped. He still had his chart and his knowledge of the cache. Much good they did him. The world is so chock-full of fools he could get no one to listen to him. Then I met him two years back and did him a service, and before he pegged out he gave me full directions and the chart, and more than that, the New Guinea coast map with the river marked down. It was easy for him to put his finger on the point—— There's no mistaking the entrance to that river."

Macquart rose and threw his cigar end into the grate. Then he sat down again. Curlewis, still standing before the stove, said nothing. With his hands in his pockets, his cigar in the corner of his mouth and his eyes fixed on the floor, he seemed oblivious of the presence of the others and to be contemplating possibilities. Screed, seeming to have lost all interest in the proceedings, was busily writing.

"Well," said Tillman, breaking silence, "that's a straight yarn if ever there was one; all the details and a chart to back them. I'm ready to risk my life on the thing and my bottom dollar—— Well, Curlewis, what do you say?"

Now Bobby Tillman had up to this known only the lighter side of Curlewis. He had played cards with him, attended race meetings, met him at the clubs and grown to regard him as a good companion, an easy-going man ready to fling his money about, and asking nothing better than amusement. He fancied that he knew Curlewis; as a matter of fact, he only knew the surface of that gentleman.

Curlewis, despite his surface irregularities, was

one of the most level-headed men in Sydney, one of the hardest business men in the Colonies, one of the least imaginative of traders. His business self and his social self were as widely different one from the other as the two profiles of Janus, and the business side of the man was the real side.

"Well," said Curlewis, taking the cigar from his mouth and tipping the ash into the grate. "It's an interesting story, but I am not inclined to back you in any financial undertaking based on it."

"But, good heavens!" said Tillman, "think for a moment. This isn't a financial undertaking but a speculation, the grandest speculation that ever flew in Sydney."

"That's just my reason," said Curlewis. "I never speculate."

"Never speculate—— Why, what's horse racing?"

"Gambling—and I never gamble."

"Oh, good Lord!" said Tillman. "Why, I've *seen* you."

"Yes, you have seen me back a horse for a few pounds, and I think you have even seen me lose a few pounds at Bridge—but I never gamble. When I say I never gamble, I don't refer to the few shillings I amuse myself by losing or winning at the card-table or on the race-course, and even in that feeble way my losings and winnings are negligible—— Last year"—he took a small note-book from his pocket and referred to it—"my losings on the race-course amounted to seven pounds, and my winnings at Bridge"—he turned to another page—"to four

pounds ten. Two pounds ten, you see, I spent last year on this sort of work, and, if my memory serves me, I came out the year before five pounds to the good."

Tillman, dumbfounded at the mechanical and orderly and entirely sane and sedate individual disclosing before his eyes, said nothing. It was like watching a butterfly breaking to pieces and a grub emerging from the debris.

"Of course," went on the other, "one may say that all business is a speculation, and so in a way it is; but one may also say that all speculations are not business, and in saying that one hits on the main truth that one must recognise if one wishes for success in business or life. Now if I were to put, say, a thousand pounds, into this venture of yours, I might lose it or I might win it back and a good deal of money on top of it. But win or lose would not alter the fact that I would have broken my principle. Besides, though the story bears the evidence of genuineness, I do not think, honestly and speaking as a business man without any intention of giving offence, that any sane business man would risk his money on it. I don't think you will carry that story about in Sydney to a profit. I am cruel only to be kind. I think you are wasting your time all of you, *unless——*"

"Yes?" said Tillman.

"The three of you put your heads together and write it out. The *Bulletin* might give you something for it."

It was Macquart who broke the stony silence that

followed, and he broke it in an unexpected way.

"Mr. Curlew is right," said he. "No sane man in Sydney would part on such a prospectus. I'm not wishing to be rude to Mr. Curlew, but sane men don't do these things, it's only the insane men that rise to a big occasion. I reckon Rhodes or some chap like that is what we want and we won't find him in Sydney, but I'm going to put my hand on that stuff if I have to walk to New Guinea 'long the great Barrier Reef and dig for it with my teeth when I get there. I've been held back from it too long. My constitution won't stand it. Well, thank you for the cigar and good-day to you, and when I see you again, I hope you'll be tearing your hair at having been out of it. Come along, boys."

He had come in last, he went out first, leading the others and looking not in the least dejected.

When they were gone, Screed stopped his writing and turned to Curlew.

"Do you know what I am thinking," said Screed, "I am thinking that chap Macquart never met any one called Smith. It's his story, first-hand."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, it was he that did the other man in, Lant—or whatever his name was—and that it was he who was sent to Noumea."

"Anyhow, he won't get any of my money," said Curlew. "Lot of d—d lunatics—but I won't say it was a bad story. That chap can pitch a yarn."

Screed finished his letter, then he rose and went out, telling the other as he took his hat from the peg by the door that he would not be long.

CHAPTER III

SCREED

OUT in the street, Tillman was the first to speak. "Well," said he, "I never thought Curlewis would have drawn blank like that. I thought it was a dead certain thing; he was the last man I'd have expected to put forward all those objections. I thought he was a sportsman. 'Pears I was wrong. Seems to me you never know what's really back of a man till it comes to the pinch. Well, we'll have to do without him and find some one else. I tell you, I'm not going to be done on this thing. It has got into my blood."

"The worst thing about it, for me, is that I can't wait," said Houghton. "I'm broke. I simply must get some money, if only to pay my landlady."

"How much do you owe her?" asked Tillman.

"Oh, it's not much, less than two pounds; but there you are, two pounds wants a lot of getting when you're on your beam ends and haven't a trade."

Tillman laughed.

He had only known Houghton for a few hours, but in Sydney a few hours in certain circles is equal, as far as acquaintanceship goes, to many days in England.

The Expedition also had woven its bonds between

them, and then Houghton was a man to get on with at sight.

"You don't worry about that," said Tillman. "I'll see you through if I have to borrow the money. The thing we want now is a drink; let's get back to Lamperts'. Who knows but we may get some one there to help."

It was now a little after twelve o'clock. The day was blazing hot, and they got on a passing tram, Tillman paying for the tickets.

Lamperts' was crowded, and the crowd was mixed and wonderful to behold. Men from up country, tanned and fresh from the sun-swept desolation of vast spaces; men from the sea, from western ports or the hazy heat-ridden harbours of the China coast or Dutch Settlements; clerks from business houses; newspaper men; racing men; men on the lookout for something to turn up; Yankees, Colonials, English, Irish, Scotch, a German or two; all in a haze of blue cigar smoke, laughing, drinking, chattering, or dumb, and on the watch.

Tillman, releasing himself from his numerous friends, herded his fellow adventurers in a corner by the bar and stood drinks.

"There's not a bit of good in being down in the mouth," said he. "We'll all go and have luncheon presently, and I'll see about that money for you, Houghton. There's a man called Drake I'm expecting to see in here; he's richer than Curlewis. I wish I'd thought of him first; anyhow, it's better late than never."

Macquart, standing with his drink in his hand,

seemed for the first time to have lost something of his enthusiasm.

"You don't expect me to tell that yarn twice in one day, do you?" he asked. "It's not as if it was a made-up yarn, then one might sling it as often as you want. Being what it is, it takes it out of one."

"You'll be able to sling it all right after a bottle of champagne," said Tillman. "You'll be—hello!" He stopped short.

The door had just opened, and a man who had entered was pushing his way through the crowd towards the bar.

It was Screed.

He had sighted Tillman and his friends, and was making towards them.

Now Screed was rarely seen about town, very rarely seen in bars. This dry-as-dust individual was ungiven to conviviality.

Men looked on Screed somewhat as we look on the unpleasant necessities of life; he was considered to be the buckram at the back of Curlewis, the thing that gave stiffening and solidity to the business. Curlewis fostered this idea. It suited him to pose as the butterfly, the ornamental partner, the easy-going, irresponsible, kindly, clap-you-on-the-shoulder unbusiness man, with a testy, level-headed partner. As a matter of fact, Arthur Curlewis was the genius of the firm, the keenest business man in Sydney and the hardest in the Colonies.

Requests for loans, time extension and so forth, were always granted by Curlewis and negatived by Screed. Curlewis had never, or scarcely ever, shown

his hand so openly as he did to Bobby Tillman that morning. With most other men he would have referred the proposition to Screed with secret instructions to refuse it. But he had a great contempt for Tillman, and, besides that, he wished to set Tillman down.

Bobby had been a bit too familiar of late, and Curlewis was not over-pleased at the confidence with which Mr. Tillman had brought forward his wild-cat scheme as though he, Curlewis, were a fair mark for the first adventurer to shoot at.

"Why, it's Mr. Screed," said Tillman, and it will be noticed that whilst Curlewis was Curlewis to him, Screed had the honour of the prefix. "Why, this is quite a surprise. Won't you join us in a drink?"

"No, thanks," said Screed. "I never drink between meals. I came down here thinking it was likely I might meet you. I want to have a word with you."

He led Tillman to the door.

"Bring those two men to my rooms this evening at seven," said he. "No, not seven, eight. I want to have a talk with the three of you."

"A talk with us?"

"Yes, just a few words."

"What about?"

"About that business you brought to Curlewis. I may be able to do something."

"You?"

"Yes. Me. And don't you say a word on this matter to any one. Not even to Curlewis."

"Well, I'm d—d," said Bobby.

"That's maybe likely," said Screed; "but all the same, bring your men along, and don't enter into any negotiations over the business with any other party. I'm interested."

"Oh, I say, this is good, this is ripping! You of all people! Say, *won't* you have a drink?"

"No, thank you; and don't go drinking yourself if you want me to do business."

"I—" said the other, "I haven't touched anything this morning, only soft drinks. Think I'm such a fool? No, sir, when I have business on hand, I'm a Quaker. Eight o'clock?"

"Eight o'clock at my rooms; 10 Bury Street."

Screed opened the door and slipped out hurriedly, as though ashamed of his visit to the place; and Tillman returned to the others radiant.

"We're safe," said he. "It's a sure thing. Screed is going to take it up." He told of the conversation with Screed.

Macquart listened attentively, then he said:

"That fixes it. I noticed that all the time he was writing, he had one ear on my story; he's harpooned. Well, he's a clever man, a much cleverer man than his partner; and he has the money, you say?"

"Oh, he's full of money," said the enthusiastic Tillman. "He's always making it and he never spends anything."

"You never can tell what a man spends," replied Macquart, "or how he spends it."

CHAPTER IV

THE CHART

SYDNEY, taking it all together, is one of the most delightful cities in the world. It breathes the air of the Pacific, and the poetry of the Islands mixes with the roar and rumble of trade. No other maritime city has such a harbour, few cities of the world such a sky; Cadmus would have loved it. Here above everything else is the spirit of Youth; Daring and High Adventure breathe in the Pacific wind and fill the lungs of the men who pursue Trade to the confines of the earth.

In this city of youth, the three adventurers were at no loss for amusement during the hours separating them from their appointment with Screed. Tillman, having raised some money, invited them to luncheon at a restaurant, after which they took themselves off to Farm Cove, where Tillman had some friends amongst the Navy people. Here he secured the loan of a boat, some lines and bait, and they went fishing for bream.

"This is better than sitting in restaurants and places," said the ingenuous Tillman. "There's no drink to be had, and you get the fresh air and you get fish—sometimes. Besides, you can think out here better than ashore."

Macquart in the stern sheets, lounging, with one foot across the gunnel and his old hat tilted over his eyes, nodded. He had done nothing, neither rowed nor helped with the lines. He seemed the concretion of Laziness. When manual work was forward, it was always the same, the engineer of fortune shrank into himself, and it was noticeable now that the two younger men, so far from even mildly resenting or jesting at the supineness of the Wonder Worker, accepted it. He was the thing that interested them at this moment more than any other thing in life. Leaving aside the fact that he held all the threads from which they hoped to weave their fortune, the man himself exercised a potent spell on their imaginations. The fishing proved good, but even the excitement of hauling in red bream and trevally did not entirely obliterate the figure of Fortune in the stern of the boat, or the fascination of the thought of what it might lead them to.

At five o'clock they hauled in their lines; Tillman presented the fish they had caught to the owner of the boat in return for the loan of it, then they went off to tea at an inn, and at eight o'clock punctually they appeared in Bury Street. Bury Street, in the suburbs of the city, has a touch of France about it; bright-looking little villas set in prim little gardens alternate with semi-detached residences. At one extremity it tails off into workmen's cottages, and it ends, frankly discarding the higher respectabilities, in a steam laundry. Screed's house was at the better end of the street, and he was working in his garden when they arrived.

He had a passion for gardening. Screed was one of those broody individuals very difficult to assess at their proper value either in morals or money. He had risen from nothing, yet he was reputed to be exceedingly well-off. He had the reputation for wealth, yet he never gave away a penny and he made no show at all. He was plain almost to ugliness and he dressed abominably. All these facts stood him well in business; they had gained for him the reputation of being a solid man. Dingy as a moth, he corrected the gaudiness of his partner, Curlewis, and he knew it. With one of the most brilliant business intellects in Sydney, he was condemned to hide his shining light behind the shutters of the firm, to do all the thinking and let Curlewis do all the talking.

He might have escaped from all this by starting in business for himself, yet he did not. There was some want in his nature, some timidity in entering upon a lone venture, some defect that made it impossible for him to row alone—and he knew it, and he hated Curlewis for it.

It was not a melodramatic hatred. He would not have hurt his partner in business or in person for the world; it was more in the nature of a good substantial dislike based on the firm foundation of his—Screed's—limitations.

Now when Macquart had told his tale that morning in the office, Screed's unerring instinct for truth where money was concerned had warned him that here was Truth. He did not think it highly probable that an expedition started after this long buried gold would succeed in bringing it back, but he considered

it highly possible. He saw in Macquart an adventurer of a new type, he felt his soul; with that profound instinct for men that never erred, he was not baffled by the strangeness of this new specimen of humanity that had come before him.

He had listened to Curlewis casting cold water on the story and he had made up his mind. He would investigate the matter for himself, and if he saw a chance of success in it, he would push it. The thing might fail—if it succeeded, the money returns would be less to him than the triumph over Curlewis. Besides this, Screed was a man of imagination with an instinct for adventure, but no stomach for it. Besides this, he possessed the gambling instinct none the less strong from long suppression.

He gave his guests good-evening, put away the hose with which he had been watering the garden and led them into the house.

Houghton looked around him as they entered. It was a long, long time since he had felt the atmosphere of comfort and home. He had been condemned to lodging-houses and cheap hotels, and life on ship-board as a second-class passenger, and he was a man who possessed a fine sense for all the things that make for ease and quiet enjoyment of existence.

The lamps were lighted in the little hall where Maori paddles and spears shewed on the walls, with here and there an etching or a rare print, and the room into which Screed led them, half library, half sitting-room, gave more evidence of the quiet good-taste of the owner.

Whiskey, a syphon of soda-water and cigars stood on a side table, and Screed, having helped his guests and asked them to be seated, plunged into the business on hand.

Standing before the fireplace with his hands in his pockets, he cross-questioned Macquart upon points in his story, and the latter answered up without hesitation or demur, evidently pleased with the business-like manner of his questioner.

"And now," said Screed, after he had finished, "let us look at that map you told me of."

Macquart rose up, fetched his hat, which he had placed on a chair by the door, and took from the lining of it a folded piece of paper yellow as parchment. He spread it on the table before Screed, and the others gathering round looked over the wool broker's shoulder as he sat with his spectacles on his nose and the paper before him.

It was a rough map of the southern coast of New Guinea, very rough in detail except for a certain section of the coast almost due north of Cape York on the Australian shore. Here the marking was much more minute, shewing several rivers and one whose disembogement was indicated by a cross.

"That's the river," said Macquart, "that one with the cross to it. The shore is pretty hilly around there and there's a big rock standing up on the shore to the east of the mouth. The Pulpit Rock it's called. It looks like a lighthouse from the sea and you can sight it a long way out. All round there is coral reef, but the course in to the river is a clear fairway. You see, the fresh water has eaten the coral

down. There's no difficulty in navigating at all, though it looks bad enough from seaward."

Screed got up and going to a portfolio lying on a ledge of one of the book-cases, took some charts from it.

"I borrowed these to-day," said he. "Let's see what they have to say on the matter."

He spread out a chart of the waters from the northern boundary of the great quadrangle of the Gulf of Carpentaria right up to the New Guinea coast and including Torres Straits, and by it another chart of the northern part of Torres Straits and the New Guinea coast directly north of Prince of Wales' Island.

This was the important chart, as it gave more particularly the reef soundings and the rivers.

"Ah, that's something like," said Macquart. "Now you can see whether my map is correct or not. Look, there's the river, there are the reefs, there's where she comes out. Look at the soundings of the channel, ten fathom water and seven fathom right up to the mouth where it rises to twelve. You see, there's no sand to silt up the mouth, that river brings down very little stuff with it, too. It's different from the other New Guinea rivers, that mostly come out through mud banks and mangroves. It's gin-bright from that big reach right down to the mouth. I reckon it's such an old river that it has eaten its way right down to bed rock. You see, it draws most of its water from the big lakes, it doesn't draw from a lot of mushy little streams."

Screed said nothing; he was still intent on the

soundings and on the comparison of the chart with the rough map of Macquart.

"Well," said he, at last, "I think we may take it that your map is not in error. Now let us get to business. I will go into your venture, on conditions."

Tillman drew a deep breath, and Houghton, who had been hanging in breathless suspense, glanced at him. Then they went to the other side of the table and took their seats, whilst Macquart, bright of eye, drew a chair up and sat down close to Screed. The meeting had suddenly become a conference, and the papers upon the table did not detract from that impression.

"The business," went on Screed, "is the biggest gamble that was ever placed on the market in Sydney. My partner Curlewis gave you his ideas about gambling this morning, and he was right; but he did not entirely touch the point. Gambling is only dangerous and only wrong from a business point of view when indulged in outside limits. Now if I were to take a thousand pounds and use it in speculation or horse-racing for the purpose of winning money, the danger to me would be not the danger of losing my thousand, but the danger of losing it and trying to get my losses back. Men never are ruined by their first losses in gambling; *they are always ruined by trying to get those losses back.*

"But if I take a thousand pounds and put it in this venture of yours, and, if this venture fails, lose my thousand, by no means would I risk more money to get my thousand back in this particular venture.

I hope I am not worrying you, but I like always to explain what is in my mind."

"Not at all—not at all," cried Tillman and Houghton. Macquart said nothing; he was rubbing his hands, palms together, under the table. He nodded to the others in approval, but not a word escaped his lips.

"I have determined, then, to take a thousand pounds," went on Screed, "and—lose it."

Macquart broke into a laugh.

"That is the spirit I like," said he. "That's what brings success."

"My terms," finished Screed, rather coldly, "will be half profits."

"Half profits," said Tillman.

Macquart said nothing.

"There are three of us——" began Houghton, then he stopped and glanced at the others as if to find out what was in their minds, but they gave him no lead.

Screed, who had taken a paper and pencil from his pocket, placed the paper on the table and holding the pencil between his fingers went on:

"If the money is there and if it amounts to the sum named, a third share—after deducting my allowance—will mean that each of you receives a very large fortune."

"I am not against Mr. Screed taking half profits," said Macquart, speaking to the others. "He fits out the expedition, we are no use at all without him. A thousand that brings him in two-hundred-and-fifty

per cent will be a good investment—but then there's the risk."

"Oh, I'm not objecting," said Houghton. "I'm only thinking that there are three of us, you, Tillman, and myself. How do we stand towards one another in the matter of sharing?"

"That's the rub," said Tillman.

Screed moved restlessly, and Macquart, as though fearful of any friction making the wool broker break away from the business, cut in.

"We won't quarrel over that," said he. "Right here and now I'll settle it. We are the three working partners and will share alike. Eighty thousand is enough for me, I'm no dud to go scraping after the last halfpenny, I only want enough to be comfortable while I live—what do you say?"

This splendid generosity nearly did for the business. For a moment, Screed took fright, and whilst Tillman was shaking the generous one's hand, the turn of a hair would have made the wool broker cry off.

Instinct told him that Macquart and Generosity formed a suspicious alliance, instinct told him that this man would most certainly diddle his partners if he had the chance. Then Reason reassured him. The gold was useless to Macquart without a man to handle it for him and get rid of it, and he—Screed—was the only man for that purpose. This was not exactly a shady job, but it was, so to speak, an extra-governmental job. Macquart trying to dispose of the treasure off his own bat would rouse enquiries, and then all sorts of claims would come down on the

money, it would be held up, and if the treasure seekers received a tithe of it after years of worry, they would be fortunate. Screed had the means to obviate all that.

Besides, though Macquart might try to diddle his partners, Tillman and Houghton were not children, but very wide-awake individuals indeed, and well able to look after their own interests and the interests of Screed as well.

So, instead of breaking off from the business, he opened the paper which he had taken from his pocket and spread it on the table beside the charts.

"I have made out a few lines with reference to this business," said he. "It's not exactly an agreement, for between you and me a legal agreement is not of much count, considering the fact that not one of us will be able to invoke the law, seeing that the law if it stepped in would place its hand most certainly on the money, it's just a letter of promise, so to speak, from the three of you, stating that in view of the fact that I am fitting out your expedition you agree to divide equally with me all monies accruing from that expedition. Then," finished Screed, with cold jocularly, "in the unlikely event of the death of any one of you, I would be assured of half his share, and in the more unlikely event of the three of you trying to play me false—don't say anything, Mr. Tillman, I am only making a legal joke—I would be able to pursue you and call the Law in, not to get me my money but to prevent you from enjoying yours, and this document, you will notice," finished Screed, "says nothing about treasure at all, so

that should I be driven to pursue you in law, I am free to make any statement I like about the object of your venture; for instance, I might say it was a pearling venture, leaving my lawyer to dig out of you in open court all about the treasure."

Macquart said nothing; the tortuous, cautious and trap-like nature of Screed's mind thus suddenly disclosed seemed to have disconcerted him. Tillman flushed and Houghton, with a spark in his eyes, looked straight across the table at the wool broker.

"We aren't going to chisel you," said he. "You are dealing with gentlemen, I hope."

"Mr. Houghton," said Screed, "there are no such things as gentlemen in business, there are only men. There is no such thing as friendship in business, only calculation and Profit and Loss. In business, one must secure the safety of one's interests by every possible means, and in going into a wildcat venture of this sort, I am going to tie you all up to my interests by every possible means—— There, you have it quite plain. Now will you all sign this paper, please—if you want my thousand pounds."

Macquart signed first, then Tillman, then Houghton.

Screed put the document away in a drawer and lit a cigar, the first he had smoked that evening.

"Now," said he, "we have settled that and we can get to work. I have my hand on the boat you want; she's a fifty-foot fishing yawl built by Bowers, she's only six years old, she has been in the pearling business and she was re-fitted last year. I have some interest in shipping matters and only a week ago Mr.

Culloch took me over her, wanting me to buy. I telephoned to him this afternoon and found she was still unsold, so I told him to hold her for me on an option. You are a good schooner sailor, Tillman; what do you say to a yawl?"

"I'd sooner handle a yawl than a schooner," said Tillman; "best rig in the world if one is short-handed."

"I know all about yawls," said Houghton. "Ought to; I owned one for a year and lived in her—only a thirty-footer though."

"I haven't used yawls, but I've used every other rig from a jackass barque to a catamaran," said Macquart. "Sail handling is pretty much a matter of instinct, I reckon; besides, I'm ready to do the navigating. I'm not an A1 navigator, but I've got all the essentials and I know the road. Give me a chronometer properly wound and set, and a decent sextant and charts, and I reckon I can make good. Why, down Sooloo way I sailed with a Dutchman, he had a pearl boat but he was crazy with rum most of the time, and I guess he was the first sailor after Noah. He'd got one of those Amstel Charts of the Sooloo waters, made in Amsterdam they were, and they'd got dolphins and mermaids figured on them, and for sextant he used a back-stick, one of the first sextants ever used. That hooker would have been the *Flying Dutchman*, only she didn't fly, yet we made out, somehow or another."

"I can do a bit of navigating myself," said Tillman, "and Houghton here tells me he has got the rudiments."

"Not much more," said Houghton.

"That's all to the good," replied Screed, who was putting the charts away. "The question was uppermost in my mind whether we would require a navigating officer, and I didn't much like the idea. We don't want any more than we can help in this job, but you can take a black fellow with you to give a hand."

Macquart rose to his feet.

"Well," said he, "that's settled; and when can we see the hooker and how long do you expect to be in getting stores on board?"

"We will arrange all that to-morrow," said Screed. "I want the three of you to be here at six o'clock in the morning, sharp at six; I have to be at the office at nine. The yawl is lying near Farm Cove and I want to take you over her. I will have some coffee and sandwiches here for you at six. And now, one point more. This business is a secret. I don't want my partner to know of it, I don't want my friends to know of it, and I don't want the authorities to know of it. You are going on a pearling venture, that is your explanation to any one who may poke his nose into the affair. If the real business leaks out, I will throw up everything."

"We'll be mum," said Tillman. "You may rest assured—and now about ready money. I have enough for myself, but Houghton here is badly placed, in fact, he's on the rocks—and as to Mr. Macquart——"

"Oh, a hundred dollars will do me," said Mac-

quart, "or less; I'm not bothering about present money, I'm only thinking of the expedition."

"Ten pounds would do me," said Houghton. "I owe four pounds to my landlord and six will carry me on till we start."

Screed took ten sovereigns from a drawer and divided them between Macquart and Houghton.

"That will carry you on for the present," said he, "and mind, six sharp to-morrow."

"By the way," said Tillman, as they took their departure, "what's the name of the yawl?"

"The *Barracuda*," replied Screed.

CHAPTER V

CAPTAIN HULL

SAN FRANCISCO might have possessed the greatest harbour in the world, the chance was thrown away for want of a genius who would have included all the great waterways known now as San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay and Suisun Bay under the generic name Harbour. Sydney was wiser. The great bay which Nature presented to her is in reality a nest of harbours; all sorts of creeks and coves give wharfage and anchorage to all sorts of craft.

Farm Cove is the naval anchorage, and beyond Farm Cove in the direction of the heads lies a narrow bay used mostly for fishing boats and yachts of small tonnage. The *Barracuda* was anchored here, and here next morning at seven o'clock, Screed and his companions turned up to inspect the yawl. They hired a boat and Tillman sculled them across to her. There was no watchman on board, and so whilst making their survey they could talk unhindered.

Tillman was at once taken with the craft. He was a born sailor, and all his life in Sydney had not dimmed the instinctive eye that told him at a glance the worth of the *Barracuda* as a sea boat. She was, as Screed had said, a fifty-footer, decked over all, possessing a cabin aft that would give accommoda-

tion to five at a pinch, a tiny fo'c'sle forward and a caboose where one could scarcely swing a cat but which was good enough for all their purposes. She had two boats, a collapsible and a four-oared clinker-built scow, possessing mast and lug sail. She was white painted and the brass work had been polished up till it shone in the morning light, the rigging both standing and running was in perfect condition, as were the spars, including the spare booms and gaffs stowed on deck; the blocks were in perfect order, the narrow white planking of the deck holy-stoned and scrubbed till each teak dowel shewed, and there was not a scrap of raffle or canvas bucket out of place or a loose rope end to be seen.

"She's a peach," said Tillman.

He led the way down below to the cabin. Though the tiny ports were closed and the sky-light, there was no trace of must or cockroaches, or that fusty smell that comes to an old ship or a vessel that has been neglected; the bunk bedding was good. Tillman, who had taken command of the inspecting party, poked his nose everywhere, into the tiny pantry, which contained everything in the form of crockery ware necessary, into the lazarette and the lockers. He opened the ports, glanced at the tell-tale compass overhead, then, leading the way on deck again, he inspected the fo'c'sle, noted that all the cooking arrangements in the caboose were in order, that the Rippingill stove was next to new and the pots and pans polished and speckless.

Then he turned to Screed.

"Well," said he, "all I can say is she is ready for

sea, and I'd start in her this afternoon if the provisions and water were aboard."

"There's nothing wanting," said Macquart, "except the charts and chronometer and the sailing orders."

"I'm glad you are of my way of thinking," said Screed. "I'm not a practical seaman myself, but, as I told you, I have some interest in shipping and I was sure this boat would fill the requirements. She is easily handled, I know that from Mackenzie, her last skipper."

"She'll handle herself," said Tillman. "I shouldn't mind taking her round the world with only Houghton here to help. You could heave her to for a rest whenever you wanted, she'd sleep hove to. Well, I will sign on for one, and there's no use wasting time asking Macquart or Houghton if they object to coming because the dinner napkins haven't pink fringes—— How long will it take you to get the provisions and everything on board?"

"A week will do it," said Screed.

"Let's fix it, then," said Macquart. "To-day is Wednesday. We'll start this day week, weather permitting—that is to say, unless there's a hurricane blowing."

"This day week," said Screed, "and now I must get back to the office; unlike you people, I am the slave of Time. I will figure out the stores list during the day and put it in the hands of Macdermott. He'll do everything, charts—stores—everything. However, the three of you might drop in and see me to-night after supper to go more closely over details,

and I will have a duplicate of the stores list to shew you."

They rowed ashore, and Screed went off in a hurry to his office, leaving the others to return to the city at their leisure.

"Screed's ashamed to be seen with us," said Tillman; "not that we are so disreputable, but he's an awful old stick, or pretends to be, and I suppose I have a reputation, rather, for jocularities and high living; well, it don't matter as long as he stumps up the coin. Come along, you chaps, I'm going to have some breakfast."

The three proceeded from the waterside to the city. It was a glorious morning, with a blue and blazing sky and wind enough to temper the heat. The white gulls fishing in the harbour came drifting on the wind occasionally right overhead, and their creaky cries mixed with the rumble of traffic and the trade of the wharves; the spirits of early morning, and summer, and youth, and adventure were abroad, and Houghton knew again that it was good to be alive.

Macquart was in high good humour. That mysterious person never smiled, his gaiety only finding expression in a certain contained vivacity of manner and movement unmistakable when you knew the man. This morning, as he walked side by side with Tillman and the other, it was very noticeable; Macquart was in feather. Everything was going well with him, his plans were succeeding to a charm, the ghostly treasure he had been carrying about the world for the last fifteen years, the phantom treasure that had nearly

ruined him, was about to materialise, soon he would be touching gold, red, warm, chinking gold.

Macquart, as he walked, scarcely heard the chatter of his companions; he was seeing yellow, his past was forgotten, the present scarcely felt and the future entirely absorbing his thoughts, when, turning a street corner, a hand clapped him on the shoulder and a voice cried:

"B—y Joe, by all the Powers!"

Tillman, wheeling round at the sound of the voice, saw the questioner with his hand still on Macquart's shoulder. A big, sailor-like man he was, rough-looking and badly dressed, yet with no touch of the fo'c'sle about him.

Macquart looked blighted, the blood had left his face, leaving it a dingy yellow; he seemed at a loss for words or breath, but only for a moment.

"Why, it's Captain Hull," said he. Then turning swiftly to Tillman: "I'll see you to-night," he said, "at the place—you know. I want to have a word with my friend, Captain Hull; haven't seen him for years." He gave Tillman a wink, as if to imply that there was more in all this than he could explain at the moment, then, turning, he walked off with the Captain, leaving Tillman and Houghton to go their way wondering at this new development and somewhat disturbed in mind.

Hull said nothing for twenty yards or so. He was chuckling to himself as if over some joke he had just heard. Then he said:

"Who were them guys?"

"Oh, two men I picked up," said Macquart.

"Sydney chaps—— What are you doing here?"

"Sydney chaps were they," said Hull, seeming deaf to the question. "Mugs for sure, unfort'nate mugs."

He slapped his thigh as he walked, seeming to commune with himself still over some joke; his last words were scarcely complimentary to Macquart, but that gentleman did not show umbrage. Macquart was not indeed in the position to take umbrage at anything Captain Hull might choose to say to him. He looked now, as he walked along with his companion, like a predatory bird subdued and led by its captor.

Captain Hull, after a few moments more of internal communion, suddenly broke silence. All at once he began speaking as though he and Macquart had only just met. Up to this, he had been gloating over his prey, now, of a sudden, he struck.

"Well," said he, "this is a surprise. It is so; and to think it's fower year and more since we parted. Fower year and more since you left me blind with the drink in that pub at San Lorenzo and bolted with me money."

"That I did not," said Macquart. "It was an accident. I was as drunk as you. I was nailed by a crimp."

"Oh, you was nailed by a crimp, was you," said Hull, as though quite open to be convinced; "pore chap, and was you shanghaied, maybe?"

"I was."

"And yet four days later you was cutting the cards at Black Sam's on the Barbary Coast and gaoled for

assault an' drink same night, payin' your fine next morning with the money you choused me of. How do you make that out?"

"It's not true," said Macquart. "I don't know who stuffed you up with those lies. It's not true—that's all I can say, and I leave it there."

"And are you still on the old treasure liftin' job," asked Captain Hull tenderly, and quite ignoring the denials of the other, "or was that a lie as well as the others you spun me?"

"That was no lie," cried Macquart, flushing under torture for the last five minutes; without a rag of his new-found self-respect and self-satisfaction left he caught at the one bit of truth, as a naked man might catch at a cloth to cover himself with. "That was no lie; the treasure was there, it's there now and only waits lifting."

"I believe you ain't wrong," said Captain Hull. "I've always took notice that the biggest liars haven't no mem'ries but gives different change every time they spins the same yarn; but you always stuck consistent to that yarn of yours, and so it was maybe I put up my two hundred dollars on a half-share lay—— Come in here." He stopped at the door of a restaurant.

"What do you want going in there for?" asked Macquart.

"I'll soon show you—you follow me, for you've got to pay."

He entered and took a seat at a table near the door, Macquart sitting down also.

"Have you any money?" asked Macquart.

"Money?" replied Captain Hull, taking up the menu. "What's that—is it a herb? Money—let's see. Oh, ay, money, I remember now, round stuff it was, made o' metal, if I remember right. No, I ain't got no money, and ain't had none since I can remember. Fower years ago I saw the last of my money—you boned it. Waiter, kim here."

The waiter approached, and with a huge forefinger, Hull indicated his desires upon the menu.

"A porterhouse steak, two kidneys and bacon to foller, scrambled eggs, toast and coffee, and look sharp—for two, yes, make it for two and this gentleman pays."

Macquart seemed resigned. He said nothing whilst the food was being brought, then, when it was on the table, he fell to on it as readily as the other. During the meal, the two men were entirely amicable, like two jackals that had discovered a carcase, they fell to, and all disputes were put aside till the meal was done with.

Nearly a sovereign's worth of food having been destroyed, Macquart paid, and the pair left the café and took their way towards Market Street. Captain Hull, well fed now, was slightly more amicable in his manner towards Macquart. He had a long, long score to wipe off against Macquart; those few words he had uttered about the San Lorenzo business gave some indication of the length of this score, but only some, and he had the means at his disposal if he chose to use them for its full wiping out. In other words, if he chose to talk even here in Sydney, he could place the hand of the Law on the shoulder of Macquart.

Captain Hull had pretty keen instincts. He had met Macquart when the latter was walking with two "Sydney chaps," Macquart had exhibited ready money in the café, Macquart was evidently on some job here in Sydney, and Hull determined in his own mind to stick to Macquart like a leech.

He scented money.

Hull, to describe him more fully, was a big, blonde, blue-eyed man, much battered by the sea and the world and himself. Children liked him. There were terrible things in his life, he had fought and drunk and rogued and ranged through all the parallels of latitude and all the years of his discretion; not a shipowner from 'Frisco to London docks would have employed him, unless on a sinking job, and that sort of thing isn't done now, much. He had been kicked out of New Ireland, he had smelt Norfolk Island, he had a bad name in Callao—yet, somehow, children liked him. But he was a hard case all the same, with one redeeming virtue, however, only to be expressed in his own language—he had never gone back on a pal.

The streets were crowded, and as they walked along, Captain Hull looked into the shop windows, examining the goods displayed therein and making remarks upon them to his companion. The two men might have been the best companions taking a morning stroll through the city, but it might have been noticed that the conversation was mostly on the part of Captain Hull. That gentleman having inspected ladies' petticoats, jewellery, and the contents of a hardware shop, paused before a tobacconist's and,

seized with the desire to smoke, entered, bought two cigars, keeping his eye on Macquart all the time through the fascia, paid for them, lit one, and came out again to find Macquart gone.

The thing seemed impossible. He had never lost sight of the elusive one, or only for the momentary time required to pick up his change and light his cigar; all the same, Macquart had vanished. Not a sign of him was to be seen in the crowded and bustling street.

"Fitchered!" said the Captain. He stood looking to right and left. He could see quite a long way, and the crowd was not dense enough to prevent him from picking out Macquart's figure had it been visible, but Macquart had vanished just as the rabbit vanishes when the conjuror places it under the tall silk hat, and just as surprisingly. Captain Hull might have asked himself whether the whole business was not an illusion, only for the fact that he was a man ungiven to self questioning.

"Well, of all the —— swine," said he, recovering his breath and his swearing capacity at the same time. "Give me the slip, has he? Turned hisself inside out whiles I was lightin' a see-gar? Blest if it ain't San Lorenzo over again, and if he ain't sold me the same old dog, b—— him. Well, we'll see." He walked along in the direction of the Paris House, passed it, and entered a bar.

Here he stood with his elbow on the counter and a whiskey before him, thinking things over.

Losing Macquart was like losing his purse. The Captain was very hard up indeed, broke to the world

—to use his own expression—and Macquart seemed flush; but the money part of the question bulked small in his eyes beside the fact that he had been done. And now, as he stood thinking things over and feeling his defeat and weighing it, a new idea came to him. Macquart was on some paying job; the fact that he had money and the fact that he was so anxious to get rid of him—Hull—pointed in the same direction.

He had lost not only the few pounds he might have squeezed out of Macquart, but the chance of standing in over some shady job.

This thought so infuriated him that he finished off his whiskey at a gulp and started off for pastures new. He wandered into Lamperts', and the first person he saw there was Tillman, who was standing at the bar with Houghton and talking to several jovial-looking strangers.

Tillman was in high feather. Somehow or another, news that he was leaving Sydney on a venture had leaked out, probably from his own lips. Before taking Houghton and Macquart to Curlewis, he had talked of something mysterious that he had up his sleeve, something in which the profits would be enormous—if it panned out. You can fancy him with his straw hat on the back of his head and a cigarette between his fingers telling one of the boys of what he was going to do. "Never you mind where—a new place and a new thing and fids of money in it, bags of coin——"

Curlewis had also been talking.

"Well, I must be off," Tillman was saying.

"Can't waste any more time on you, Billy. I've business to attend to." He took Houghton's arm and led him off. Neither of them noticed Hull, whom they would certainly have recognised as the man who had taken Macquart off that morning, and the swing door had scarcely closed on them when criticism broke out at the counter.

"God help the business that Bobby is attending to," said Billy, a bibulous-looking youth in check tweed and with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "I reckon I know it, too. They've got a new barmaid at the Paris House."

"No, it aren't that," said a gentleman, with a face like a horse and a diamond horse-shoe in his cravat. "Bobby's on some sure enough lay; he's been tryin' to get Curlewis into it. I heard a chap sayin' Cur had told him all about it, a gold-mine hid somewhere up north. Bobby has been goin' about the last few days with a crazy-lookin' guy that's got the location of the mine, a chap with the hair growin' through his hat an' his ten toes stickin' through his boots."

"I've seen him," said Billy. "They were in here drinking yesterday morning; they had an English chap with them and they went off in a hurry; they all came back here towards lunch and they were talking here, same as I am to you, when that injia-rubber image Screed, Cur's partner, came in through the door and had a clack with Bobby and went out again."

"I don't believe Cur will plank any coin on pros-

pectin'," said the gentleman of the horse-shoe; "wool brokin' is all the gold mine *he* wants."

Captain Hull, who had obtained a whiskey, stood with it in his hand waiting to hear more, but the conversation turned away from Tillman to horses, and, finishing his drink, the Captain went to the telephone-box in the corner, took the directory, and turned its pages laboriously till he found what he wanted. Then with the address of Curlewis and Screed in his mind, he started off.

Certain that the crazy-looking guy referred to by the horsy man was Macquart, he was now more convinced than ever that something was up, and quite determined to be in it or to spoil everything.

He reached Curlewis' office, went upstairs, gave his name to the clerk and in a few minutes was admitted to the inner office and sanctum of the firm, where Curlewis was standing with his back to the stove, with his hands in his pockets, talking to Screed, who was seated at his desk.

Hull, hat in hand, made a scrape, half turned to see that the door was shut and then spoke.

"Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Curlewis?" said he. "I've somethin' to say to Mr. Curlewis, and it won't bear repeatin' before any one else."

"My name is Curlewis," replied the chief of the firm, "and you can say whatever you like here. This is Mr. Screed, my partner—sit down."

"Well, now," said the Captain, taking the seat pointed out to him and placing his hat on the floor, "did you by any chance in the last day or two come

across a guy by the name of Macquart? I'm not askin' to be inquisitive. I have my meanin'."

"I take you," replied Curlewis, "and I can give you an answer straight. I *have* during the last day or two come across a guy by the name of Macquart. What about him?"

"Ah, there's the rub," said Hull. "I'm not askin' to be inquisitive, but did this chap lay any proposal before you with regard to money or mines or such like?"

"You may take it from me that he did," said Curlewis; "a very big proposal—what more?"

The Captain was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Well, that's what I wanted to be at. I reckon you are goin' in with him on some deal, and all I have to say is, where he goes, I goes."

"I don't quite understand," said Curlewis.

"This way. If I don't get half shares with Macquart, I'll blow the gaff on him and bust up the business."

Screed, who was writing, or pretending to write, moved uneasily. Curlewis smiled.

"Well, my dear sir," said he, "go and blow the gaff on this person as much as you please, it is no affair of mine. I have nothing to do with him. I refused his plan to hunt for gold in New Guinea and there's an end of it."

"New Guinea," said Hull. "So he's on the old lay. I ought to 'a' guessed it; swab! Well, I'm sorry to have taken up your time, but might I ask

you where he's livin' now, or where I might find him?"

"I should think most probably, if you wait long enough, you might find him in gaol," said Curlewis.

"No, I cannot tell you where he lives; the gentleman did not leave his visiting card behind him."

The Captain picked his hat up from the floor, rose from his chair and hung in irons for a moment; Screed at the same time rose in a leisurely fashion, put on his hat, and collected some letters as if for the purpose of taking them to the post.

"Well, good-day to you, gentlemen," said Hull at last. "I've lost my time and yours, and there's no more to be said; but let me once lay my hands on that gink, and, Lord! won't I treat him lovely."

He went out, and, disregarding the lift, thundered down the stairs.

In the street, he took off his hat and wiped his brow with his coat sleeve.

It was a comfort to think that Macquart had failed to rope in Curlewis, but it was rather a cold comfort, considering the fact that the Captain was at his last half-crown. He walked away down the street, revolving this latter fact in his mind.

The fo'c'sle stared him in the face. To the after-guard users of the sea, the fo'c'sle is the last resort, the last threat of Fate. Hull, a once Master-mariner of decent repute, had been driven into the fo'c'sle time and again these later years, and now the prospect was opening before him once more. At the corner of the street, he was standing with his hands

in his pockets cursing his luck and Macquart alternately, when some one spoke to him.

It was Screed.

"Captain Hull," said Screed, "a word with you."

"Good Lord!" said Hull, recognising the other, "why, it's Mr.——"

"Screed, yes, that's my name. I want to speak to you for a minute; walk with me down the street and we can talk as we go. I may be of use to you. Now, see here, what's all this about that man Macquart?—What do you know about him?"

"What do I know about him," burst out the Captain. "I know this, he's the biggest blackguard that ever walked on two feet."

"I know that," said Screed, "or, at least, that he is a very considerable scamp; what I'm getting at is this: he came to a friend of mine with a proposition about buried treasure in New Guinea—now, clear your mind of all prejudice—do you know anything against that proposition? I mean, is it wildcat or genuine?"

The Captain was silent for a moment. Then he said: "It's right enough. I b'lieve the stuff's there and the fellow's been tryin' after it for years, but he's such an onnatural bad 'un, he's never been able to pull the thing off. He had me on to it; we all but got a chap in 'Frisco to put up the coin for an expedition, then he ran crooked with a friend of the chaps—ran crooked over a ten-cent business—and the deal was off. He finished up by boning all my coin and leavin' me drunk in a pub in San Lorenzo fower years ago. Now, I ain't much, but

I'm straight over a deal and I've run guns and smuggled and done many another job off the O. K., but I ain't an out and outer. No, I ain't an out and outer. Mac is, an' that's why I want to get hold on him. I wants to punch that chap's head, I'm sufferin' to punch that chap's head—I'm——"

"Don't talk of punching heads," said Screed. "That's not business and you are wasting time. Macquart has got his expedition together through a friend of mine, and he is starting with two other men to pull this gold; the only doubt I have is that he seems such an extraordinary villain, he may by some chance——"

"I get you," cut in the Captain. "Be some chance, he'll do these two guys in. He will so."

"They are good men," went on Screed, "and I have warned them to be on the look-out, and I will warn them again, but one must take all precautions, and that's where you come in. You are older than they are, and you have a more intimate knowledge of this man. Now, Captain, I have here a job for you. Take yourself out of Sydney to-day so that there may be no chance of your meeting Macquart, and call upon me to-morrow morning at eight o'clock. Here's my card with my address."

The Captain took the card between an immense finger and thumb.

"I'll come," said he, "but I'll let you know pretty plainly, I'm bust, broke to the world; half-a-crown is all I have, and God knows where I'm to get the next happenny."

"Here's a sovereign," said Screed, "and go slow

with it. Don't get on the liquor, whatever you do, for that would spoil all, and Sydney is full of temptation. Get out somewhere on the harbour side, have as much food as you want, but no drink—and, above all, don't talk. Don't mention this affair and don't mention my name. If you do, I'll call off and you may whistle for Macquart. See here, Captain, you may pull out of this a rich man. Remember that, and don't spoil the chance of your life. I'm reckoned a lucky man, and any business I take up goes through. Nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would not go on with this affair, knowing what I know about Macquart. Well, it does not put me off. I don't care a dump for a man's character, so long as his scheme is good and so long as I know his character and can take precautions against it."

"I reckon you'll have to take a pocketful of precautions if you're dealing with Macquart," said Hull.

"I have come to that conclusion," replied Screed.

CHAPTER VI

THE OUTFITTING

TILLMAN and Houghton, little knowing of the Hull incident, and Macquart little knowing of Screed's interview with Hull, the work of storing the *Barracuda* and getting her ready for sea went on apace.

One thing Tillman noticed. Macquart took up his residence on the yawl and would not leave her. Once, when Tillman wanted a messenger to go up-town after some fittings that had not arrived, he asked Macquart to go, and Macquart refused, alleging a sore foot.

Macquart slept on board and did his own cooking. Held by the deadly fear of Hull, he scarcely shewed himself on deck, and when a boat put off from shore he inspected her through one of the ports before coming up to receive her.

"I can't make out what's up with Macquart," said Tillman to Houghton. "Looks to me as if he was keeping hid from something."

"He's a rum customer," replied Houghton. "I expect, maybe, he owes money ashore; anyhow, it's none of our business."

They had indeed plenty of business to attend to without troubling about Macquart. Though the

Barracuda was reckoned ready for sea, there were all sorts of matters to be put right and adjusted, all sorts of things to be thought of, considering the fact that the expedition might last six months or more. Caulking tools and material, for instance, had not been supplied or thought of, and they were faced with the difficulty that Screed was no sailor and therefore they had to overhaul everything for themselves. Screed, moreover, though he had mentioned the fact that he was putting up a thousand pounds, had a terrible eye towards expense, and they had to submit every item to him and often fight to obtain what they wanted.

"I'm blest if I'd have undertaken the job if I'd known Screed was such a crab over halfpence," said Tillman one day in disgust. "I've been fighting him over the provisions. I want victuals for nine months, and he has only made out for six. I told him plain it wouldn't do; he seemed to think we could victual up there on the Guinea Coast; *he* doesn't care if we go short—well, I knocked him on that. I told him we couldn't get anything up there but *bêche de mer* and cocoanuts; of course, I was talking through my hat. I don't know but that we mayn't strike a co-operative store, though it's not likely; anyhow, he gave in. Then there's guns. Three Winchesters and three Colts automatics was my ultimatum, with two hundred rounds apiece. Lord! how he squealed! but I got 'em."

"He talked a lot about that thousand pounds," said Houghton. "I don't believe this set out will cost him more than three hundred. The *Barracuda*

isn't lost money, he can sell her when we come back."

"You mean if we come back," said Tillman. "We are taking an awful big risk, and don't you make any mistake about that."

"I'm not afraid of the risk."

"Afraid of it! Why, the risk is all the pleasure of the business. I tell you, I'm sick of living here in Sydney and knowing every day what's coming next. I want to get out and live."

"I'm the same," said Houghton.

The collapsible boat, on full inspection, proved rotten in parts of its canvas. Screed suggested patching, but Tillman stood out either for a dingy or a new collapsible. He carried his point; also the spare mainsail, if tried, would have blown to tatters in any squall; canvas, especially in the tropics, has only a certain length of life even if little used—this point was put right. A patent sea anchor was the last infliction put upon Screed by Tillman, and Screed bore it, though badly. Screed had this peculiarity, though he fought over halfpence and about little things, he was lavish when what he considered to be the essentials were at stake. Thus, whilst he groaned and moaned over a few square yards of extra canvas, the charts, compass, sextants—there was a spare one—and chronometer were of the best.

The outfitting of the expedition took a fortnight instead of a week, and on the evening before the day of starting, Tillman, having given a last look round to see that everything was good, took his seat

on deck beside Houghton and Macquart, who were seated by the saloon hatch.

"Well, that's done with," said Tillman. "Everything is a-board, even to the tobacco; twenty-five pounds of Navy plug ought to last us, and I made the outfitters throw in five boxes of Borneo cigars by way of langnyappe. There's no drink—only six bottles of whiskey by way of medicine, and a bottle of chlorodyne."

Said Houghton: "You've forgot one thing. Suppose we have accidents?"

"Well," said Tillman, "what then?"

"Where's your surgical instruments and things?"

Tillman sniffed. "Much good they would be without a surgeon. We haven't got to have accidents. We can't afford luxuries of that sort. What do you think you're going on—a yachting cruise?"

"I know something of bone setting," said Macquart, "and I can stop bleeding from an artery—used to be able to do so."

As he spoke, a dusky form emerged from the fo'c'sle hatch, stood erect, and then going to the side leaned over the rail looking shoreward.

It was Jacky, the black fellow secured by Screed to act as cook and deck-hand. Jacky was used to the sea, he could steer and was a first-rate boat hand. Two natives had been in the original programme, but on second thoughts Screed had declared for only one, and wisely; in an expedition of this sort the native element is always best reduced to a minimum. Natives can't think much unless they can talk together.

Tillman, having seen the anchor light swung, smoked another pipe, then the three adventurers went below and turned in, unconscious of the surprise that Screed was about to spring upon them in the morning.

CHAPTER VII

THE "BARRACUDA" SAILS

TILLMAN was on deck just before sunrise, and as the sun broke over the hills Macquart and Houghton appeared, rubbing the sleep from their eyes and yawning. Jacky was skipping about in and out of the caboose getting breakfast ready, and the sounds and smell of bacon being fried filled the air.

It was a lovely morning, the white gulls were fishing on the ruffled blue water of the harbour and a warm, steady land wind was blowing favourable for the Heads.

Jacky, leaving the cooking for a moment in abeyance, skipped below to lay the table in the cabin, whilst the others hung on deck talking and leaning on the rail with an eye shoreward for the boat that would bring off Screed and the pilot.

"I'm blest if that nigger doesn't remind me of a bounding kangaroo," said Tillman, "and he seems to have a dozen pair of hands; look at him cooking the breakfast and laying the table at the same time, and he was more use getting the stores on board than half a dozen thumb-fisted stewards would have been."

"Look," said Houghton. "Here's the boat."

A white painted boat was putting off, two men at the oars and two men in the stern sheets.

"It's not the pilot boat," said Tillman. "It's Screed; but who is the chap beside him?"

Macquart was standing with his hand shading his eyes watching the approaching boat, then he turned and went below.

As the boat came alongside, Tillman threw the ladder down and Screed came on deck followed by his companion; it was Captain Hull.

"So you are all ready to start," said Screed. "Well, I have brought you a new man, a friend of mine, Captain Hull. He is also an old friend of Macquart's. He is going with you as supercargo. He understands all about the business, and as you are a bit short-handed, you will find him useful—but where's Macquart?"

"He's below," said Tillman, taken aback at this new move; "but this, I must say, is a surprise— A word with you."

He led Screed forward.

"What on earth have you brought that chap for?" said he. "I remember him; he met Macquart one morning in the street and they went off together. What's the meaning of it? How do we stand?"

"You stand just this way," said Screed. "Macquart is one of the biggest blackguards on God's earth. I didn't know all about him till recently. Hull is the antidote to him. Please trust me in this matter, for my interests are yours. Macquart would

have done you and Houghton in like the babes in the wood if you had gone alone with him. Hull is the iron grip I will keep on him. Hull has been let down by him. Hull knows enough to hand Macquart over to the police, and he's strong enough to hold Macquart down, and he's straight enough to suit me; he's a spirit level compared to Macquart."

"My God!" said Tillman. "What a ship's company packed away in this ten-cent boat."

"Oh, you'll get on all right, but you must never forget there's a live bomb-shell aboard, and that is Macquart. Put your trust in Hull and back him if there's trouble. I have told him I would tell you everything and warn you. Don't ever lose your temper on this job, don't get heated up with the idea that Macquart is a rogue and worse—of course he is. A half million of hidden money *means* roguery somewhere. Macquart most likely did John Lant in years ago. I'm pretty sure he did, but we mustn't trouble about that; what we want is to lay hands on the money. Now come aft; Macquart is down below, you say; hiding from Hull, most likely. I'm going to confront them."

He led the way aft, and then he went down to the little cabin, followed by Tillman, Houghton and Hull. Macquart was seated at the table. He had started breakfast on some bread and a tin of sardines. Dumbfounded at the appearance of Hull coming off with Screed, he fancied that the whole expedition was blown upon, and he was filling up before receiving his marching orders.

But Screed, when he entered the cabin, appeared quite unconcerned, in fact he was smiling.

"I've brought a friend of yours on board," said he, "Captain Hull; he has asked to join this expedition and I have let him. He is sailing with you as supercargo—this is him."

Hull, entering the cabin last, stood for a moment gazing on Macquart, who was now standing up, a smile gradually beaming across his broad face. One might have fancied Macquart to have been his long lost brother.

"Why, it's me dear friend Joe," said Captain Hull, "or do me eyes deceive me! Why, Joe, you've grown fat since I lost y' last, fat you've grown and bustin' with prosperity you look—well, if this don't beat all!"

Macquart's face shewed nothing of what was going on inside of him. He held out his hand to Hull.

"This is unexpected," said he. "So you're going with us? Well, that's to the good; a capable navigator is always useful, even if we are a bit crowded."

He sat down and helped himself to another sardine, and in that moment Screed seemed to glimpse the full formidableness of this man who had suddenly received such a knock-out blow in such a manner.

Jacky had followed them down with a huge dish of friend bacon and eggs, and the whole crowd now took their places at the table, a terrible squeeze, whilst Jacky, skipping on deck again, fetched the coffee. Houghton was the only one at that break-

fast party who did not understand the new development. It astonished him that Screed should have sprung this stranger upon them at the last moment; he remembered vaguely Hull's face, which he had glimpsed that morning more than a fortnight ago, but he said nothing. It was some move of Screed's, and if Tillman was satisfied it was not for him to complain.

"Well, gentlemen," said Screed, as the meal drew towards an end, "we'll soon have the pilot on board now and the wind is favourable. One last word to you. This expedition means a lot to us all. Captain Hull here knows what we are after, and his share will be arranged between him and Mr. Macquart without touching either your shares or mine; let there be no dissensions between any of you; work for the common end, for only in that way will you pull the thing off to a profit. When you come back here with what you are going in search of you will find no worry, no difficulty in taking your profits. Once I have touched and told the stuff, I will give each of you a cheque for your amount. You may think my share in this business only consists in fitting out this vessel and starting you off. Far from that; my real help comes in when you are back with the stuff. Remember this, if you had the *Barracuda* up to the hatches in sovereigns, you would be poor men, simply because you could not convert your sovereigns into credit at a bank; to no port in the world could you take them with safety and without being sniffed over by money changers or customs—that's all I have to say."

He rose from the table; he had narrowly watched Macquart's face during this speech and fancied he had caught the faintest trace of a smile, the vaguest ghost of a hint at derision. He could not be sure, but the fancy made him more than ever satisfied that Hull was in this business.

They came on deck just as the pilot came alongside in his petrol launch. Tillman, who had taken on the duties of skipper, knowing more about the management of small craft even than Hull, had arranged the watches in a general conference on the day before, picking Jacky to act with him as port watch, and Houghton and Macquart for the starboard. The advent of Hull would not disturb this arrangement. Hull declared himself ready and willing to act as spare hand and to assist in any way that might be useful.

"I ain't particular," said he. "I've all my life been used to masts and yards and a quarter deck a body can turn on. I'm free to admit this soap-dish is a new thing to me and this pocket handkerchief work with gaffs and booms is outside my line. If Mr. Tillman here has a better clutch on 'em than me, well, then, he's my skipper; if he's a bit dicky on the navigatin', well, then, he can reckon on me to lend him a hand."

He meant it. Hull on board the *Barracuda* was as much out of his element as a trout in a child's aquarium. He had been used to space; fore and aft rig confused him; though used to vast spaces of canvas, the mainsail of the *Barracuda* seemed to him vast in proportion to the hull, the swing of the

main boom agitated him. He was obsessed, in fact, with the idea of the smallness of the craft, an obsession that would wear off in time. The pilot was a friend of Tillman's, who supposed they were off to the islands, and he came not because he was wanted, but to give them a send-off.

When he came on board, Screed shook hands all round and departed for shore. Then the anchor was hove short, Hull, Houghton and Jacky at the windlass, the jib and mainsail was set and the anchor brought home.

The live feel of the little craft when she was free of the mud sent a thrill through Tillman, who was at the wheel, the way she answered to her helm delighted him. Followed by the pilot boat, she passed cove after cove of the lovely harbour, gliding like a gull on the wind she opened the Heads, and, now, before them, like an enchantress holding the gifts of death or fortune, stretching towards them the lure of youth, lay the blue and boundless Pacific.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARGONAUTS

THEY had dropped the pilot,, the Heads were passed and the white digit of Macquarie light-house lay behind them and on the port quarter.

Tillman at the wheel was feeling more and more the fine qualities of the *Barracuda* as a sea boat, for out here the sea was fresh and strong, the tide coming up against the wind and foam caps breaking across the hard shoreward green and meadows of distant azure.

The old Greeks knew seas like this when they spoke of the sea as a country haunted by Proteus shepherding the flocks of ocean, and Ulysses might have steered the *Argo* through the same blue fresh water when he set out on the same old quest of treasure and adventure.

If Tillman had ever heard of Ulysses and the Golden Fleece, he had, no doubt, forgotten them, nor would he have been in a humour to draw parallels even had he remembered that far-off adventure. Yet the *Argo* departing on her wonderful voyage was a sister ship of the *Barracuda* spreading her sails to the winds of the Pacific, freighted with dreamers, and bound on a business equally adventurous—and almost equally fantastic.

Houghton was standing holding on to the weather rail and talking to Hull. Macquart had taken his seat plump on deck by the galley and was engaged with a needle and thread on a rent in his coat, which he had taken off. Jacky, the native, was in and out of the tiny fo'c'sle putting things in order, and as Tillman looked at his companions, at the boundless sea and the receding Heads, for the first time the true inwardness of this business broke upon him and the true nature of the responsibility he had taken up so lightly.

Bobby Tillman had been one of the Sydney Boys. Spending money, yacht and horse-racing, living too well and recovering from the effects, had been amongst his main occupations in life. An adventure to a New Guinea river for the purpose of recovering half a million of gold there cached had seemed to him a gorgeous and light-hearted business. Out here, faced by the sea and his companions, the full knowledge of the fact that this was an undertaking of all undertakings, the most desperate and dangerous, was now coming to him, and with it the sense of his responsibility.

Had the crew of the *Barracuda* consisted of religious sailormen, and had the object of their quest been a cache of Bibles for distribution amongst the heathen, this voyage would not have been destitute of danger. But the quest was gold, and gold in its most dangerous form—abandoned treasure.

Tillman was not thinking of this as he steered. He was reviewing his dubious companions, seeing them as though it were for the first time. Hough-

ton he knew and could trust, Macquart he guessed to be a scoundrel, both from Screed's words about him and from the promptings of a vague instinct; and about Macquart the most disturbing fact was this peep of the devil through a fascinating personality. Hull was much more understandable. Hull, sprung on them at the last moment by Screed as a check upon Macquart, carried his certificate of character in his face, and it was not a first-class certificate by any means. Still, instinctively Tillman felt Hull to be far more reliable than Macquart.

Jacky, the black fellow, was an entirely unknown quantity.

This, then, was the crowd small in number yet full of possibilities which Tillman had to deal with and hold together, and with which he had to face the sea, the weather, unknown natives and the passions possibly to be roused through the nature of the quest and the natures of the seekers.

Tillman never turned a hair. This irresponsible and lighthearted optimist, this trifler with life, this haunter of race-courses and main prop of Lamperts' recognised all the difficulties and dangers of his position to the full, yet heeded them not. He felt himself standing on a sure rock and that rock was the fact that the *Barracuda* was proving herself a splendid sea-boat. So he stood, twirling the wheel, till, Macquarie lighthouse wiped away by distance, he called Jacky to the helm, gave him the course and joined Hull and Houghton at the lee rail; then the three sat down on deck by Macquart, who had finished his mending, and Tillman pro-

ducing a rough chart of the East Australian seaboard began to lay down their course for the instruction of the others.

"Here we are," said he, "almost level with Broken Bay, twenty-eight hundred miles or more from Cape York and Torres Straits. We keep our present course till we strike Longitude 30° —that's just level with the Solitary Islands. Then we strike more north, so, till we're level with Great Sandy Island; keep on so till we hit Latitude 20° , avoiding the tail of the Great Barrier Reef and then strike bold nor'-nor'-west through the Coral Sea, and then nor'-west for the Straits. We are going outside the Barrier Reef, you see; all the steamer lines and most of the trading ships go inside the reef, but we're going outside. I've talked it out with Screed. He wanted me to go inside and hug the coast, but I decided not; we're in no hurry and I'll take plenty of sea room. Level with Cape Grafton it's pretty difficult water. There's the Madelaine Cays, there's Holnes Reef—we have to strike between those two."

"How long will it take us to hit the Straits?" asked Houghton.

"All of thirty days if we have good weather," replied Tillman. "Maybe two months if we haven't—you see we've got the current against us."

"Well, I'm not the man to complain if it took us a twelvemonth," said Hull. "Good grub and plain-sailin' is all I asks, s'long as I'm not divided from my friend, here, Mac. Mac and me is Si'mese pals—ain't we, Mac?"

Macquart grunted; he had taken a pipe and some

tobacco from his pocket and was busy cutting up twist. Tillman listened and wondered. He knew from Screed that Hull had a "down" on Macquart, that Macquart had played Hull false. He did not know the full extent of the division that existed between the precious pair, all the same he did not like Hull's bantering tone and tried to change the subject, but Hull persisted.

"We've sailed the seas together and always shared equal, haven't we, Mac? And now we're sailin' and sharin' again just as in old times."

"Just so," said Macquart.

"And we'll be rich together when we've hit the stroke; why, Mac, we'll be drivin' in kerridges, you and me."

"That's so," said Macquart. "There's enough for all. I'm only a plain man and want little in the way of worldly goods; there's enough for the lot of us—when we get the stuff back safe and sound."

Houghton, who did not catch the undercurrent in this conversation, struck in.

"Lord!" he said. "It will be splendid, if we pull it off. I never knew what money meant till I found myself without it, and I never believed, really, in this expedition till now we've started."

"We've got to pull it through," said Tillman, "and it will take some pulling." He rose to his feet and went aft, Houghton following him.

Hull and Macquart found themselves alone for the first time, and Hull, who had just finished filling

a pipe, lit it and took a few puffs. He was silent for a moment, then he spoke:

"Mac," said he, "who are them two guys you've let into this bizziness?"

"Well, you ought to know," replied Macquart, "seeing you've been up Screed's sleeve for the last fortnight."

"That's true," said the Captain, "but it was precious black up that sleeve. He hid me away and fed me well, but not one word did he let out, only the promise to put me even with me dear friend Mac."

"Do you mean to say he didn't tell you all about this expedition?"

"He did," said Hull; "told me enough to make me know it's the same old lay you've been on for years. Why, Mac, it was the New Guinea gold you was singin' about in 'Frisco fower years ago, that time you laid me out with a dope-drop and left me stranded at San Lorenzo, and it's the New Guinea gold you're after still. I know that much. What I want to know now is two things: first of all, who are them two guys and what are they worth on this job?"

"Oh, they're just Sydney chaps," said Macquart. "Nothing much; Houghton hails from England, got stranded in Sydney, and I met him in the Domain. Tillman, he's a first-rate hand at sailing a boat like this. Did you expect me to go on this job single-handed?"

"Not by no manner of means, else I wouldn't have come aboard to help you, Mac. Why, I hunted for

you like a lost child after you give me the slip outside the 'bacca shop. I wouldn't have you go alone on this traverse, not on no account, you may be sure of that. Well, now, to come to the second point. What are you after?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I says. You've been always a-gettin' up expedishins or tryin' to get them up to go for this stuff; is it flap-doodle or is it real? Is the stuff there or is it bunkum?"

"I give you my word of honour——"

"I wouldn't take your word of honour on no account," said the Captain. "I wouldn't deprive you of it, Mac; answer me up, is it real? and if it ain't, answer me up what you *are* after. If you plays me crooked, I gives you my word of honour I'll twist your neck. There's no police here, Mac, and no crowners jury."

"You may take it from me it's the solid truth," said Macquart. "The gold's there and only waiting to be lifted." As he spoke, he raised his head and expanded his nostrils, as though sniffing the treasure.

A great gull passed in the blue sky above, its shadow swept the white deck and bellying mainsail of the *Barracuda*, and its voice came on the wind as it glided away to leeward.

Houghton had gone below, Tillman was at the after-rail, leaning over smoking and contemplating the wash of the yawl. Jacky was at the wheel.

"It's there as sure as I'm here," went on Macquart, "unless an earthquake has swallowed the river bank."

Once Macquart got on the subject of the treasure, he became almost a different man. There could be no doubt at all of his genuineness on that subject.

"Or some one has been and scooped it," put in Hull.

"What d'you mean?" said Macquart.

"I mean this way. I meets you fower years ago and you was talkin' of this hive; I meets you to-day and you're talkin' of it still. How many people have you given the office to over this here business, that's what I want to know?"

"No one," said Macquart, "not a soul. It's God's truth that since I saw you in 'Frisco four years ago till the other day, I have not hit one man who would have been of use to me. How could I? Going about the world in rags. Once or twice I had a chance to make some money and I did, but the luck turned against me. No, it's the cold truth, since I seen you last I haven't had a dog's chance. Then I met Tillman, there, in a bar in Sydney, and I was so gravelled I told him the whole yarn over a drink; he took it up hot, then I met Houghton, that other chap, in the Domain and introduced him to Tillman, and the result is we're here."

"That's so," said Hull. "We're here right enough."

Macquart looked at the other out of the corner of his eye.

"The thing I can't understand," said he, "is how you are here. We'll be better friends if we are straight with one another."—Hull gave a short laugh at this. "And leaving friendship alone, you

have set my curiosity working—how the deuce did you pick up Screed?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Hull. “When you played me that dog’s trick and slipped your cable outside that ’baccy shop, I saw them two guys, Tillman and Houghton, in a bar. I remembered sightin’ them with you, and I listened to their talk. Then I put two and two together, and got my claws on Screed. Screed’s got no great opinion of you, Mac, specially after the yarn I spun him of how you choused me in ’Frisco. Screed knows I know you and your dog tricks, and he’s put me a-board to see fair play between you and them two pore unfortunits. I’m your natural guardian, Mac, till we get the boodle safe to Sydney, and then I’ll be your pardner. You’ve got to give me half of your scoop. D’you understand that, Mac?”

“When we get that stuff to Sydney, you can have half my share,” said Macquart. “There’s no use in my pretending that I’m satisfied you have a right to it, but there it is; you have got the bulge on me and there’s no use kicking.”

“Not a bit,” said Hull; “and I’m agreeable to be friendly through the voyage and home again, but don’t you never imagine I’m asleep. Snorin’ on my back, I’ll still have one eye open on you, Mac, and both fists ready to scrag you if you play any of your monkey tricks.”

He rose up and went aft to take his trick at the wheel, leaving Macquart still seated on the deck and revolving, no doubt, the situation in his mind.

CHAPTER IX

A VISION OF THE DEEP

THEY passed the latitude of Point Danger with the land a hundred and thirty miles to port, drawing closer ashore till they reached 25° , with Great Sandy Island shewing away across the blue and sparkling sea.

Never were adventurers more blessed by weather; days of azure and nights of stars brought them steadily north with a warm, favourable wind that made life a delight. The sails needed scarcely any handling, watches were kept anyhow, and Macquart, who had promised great things in the way of assistance in working and navigating the boat, "let go all holts," to use the expression of Hull, and retired into himself, snoozing most of the day in his bunk below.

Hull, on the contrary, having promised nothing and coming on board in fact as a supercargo, did much. He took his trick at the wheel, helped in the navigation and slowly and surely from the very first day rose in ascendancy.

He was an older man than any on board, except Macquart; he was a very big man physically, and it would seem that he possessed some pinch of that iron stuff of the soul that makes for ascendancy.

However that might be, the fact remains that by the time they had reached the Point Danger Latitude the crew of the *Barracuda* had shaken themselves down just as a chemical mixture precipitates itself. Tillman, who had started as captain, had, without recognising the fact, all but given up his position to Hull. Jacky, the black fellow, owing to his practical knowledge of the sea, immense activity and quickness in the uptake, had come out of the galley, so to speak, and risen to a sphere of usefulness even above Houghton's. Macquart, who ought to have been leader of the whole party, if not captain, had sunk to the bottom and it was the plain truth that here, faced with the actualities of the expedition, he appeared to have no more sway upon the fortunes of the business than any cockroach crawling in the cabin.

I say "appeared," for Macquart was one of those men of whom it is impossible to speak definitely, one of those men who are never so potent or so dangerous as when they appear idle or innocuous.

Things were like this when an event occurred that brought Hull even more to the forefront and consolidated his position. They had passed the latitude of the Cumberland Islands; the tail of the Great Barrier Reef lay by computation fifty miles to port and ahead all that tangle of reefs and cays stretching from the Madelaine Cays to Flinders Reef. The wind that had been holding fair and steady suddenly dropped and they awoke one morning to find themselves drifting in a glacial calm.

Tillman came on deck at six in his pyjamas and

with a towel over his arm; he found that Jacky had left the wheel and was busy in the galley. The *Barracuda* with her beam to the swell was rolling slightly to the tune of creaking cordage and swinging boom, the air was still and breathless, and the great sun was blazing upon a world of water and sky, infinite and wonderful in its depths and shades of azure.

The sea, like a great veil of sapphire-tinted satin, heaved in wide meadows of swell, there was not a ruffle on its surface and all to the east it blazed back the light of the sun like a mirror.

"My word!" said Tillman. He stood for a moment whistling and skimming the horizon with his eyes, then he undressed and began to tub, Jacky leaving the galley for the purpose of throwing buckets of water over him.

As he dried, Houghton came on deck followed by Hull.

"It's a dead flat ca'm," said Hull, standing with his hands clasping the bulwark rails and his gaze fixed across the sea, "and I'd sooner see a gale o' wind—I would so—I'd sooner see a gale o' wind."

"What are you croaking about?" said Tillman.

Hull ruffled at this and for the first time on the voyage shewed irritation.

"You're a damn longshoreman," said he. "If you ain't alive to the meanin' of a ca'm in these waters with the drift we've got, you'll maybe liven up when we're aground on some b—y reef. She's been driftin' half the night and this thing may last for days. We're a long sight too close to that

there Barrier to please yours trooly—that's my meanin'."

Tillman, seeing the other's frame of mind, went below to dress whilst Hull, cutting a chew of tobacco, stood with his back to the bulwark rail, watching and criticising Houghton, who was now being swilled by Jacky.

"I never can understand what you chaps find in that sort of thing," said the Captain, who was ungiven to superfluous washing. "If a chap was to swill water on me like that I'd kick him blind instead of payin' him terbacca to do it same as you pay Jacky. It ain't nach'ral."

"It bucks one up," said Houghton.

The Captain, having no answer to this, walked aft. Then, seeing Jacky coming from the galley with a steaming coffee-pot in his hand, he went below, Houghton followed him, and breakfast was served. Canned kippered herrings, fried bacon, and tomatoes formed the meal. Jacky had baked some rolls the night before and there was ship's bread—which nobody touched.

Hull's bad temper vanished before the food. His appetite was enormous, and he was proud of it; Macquart, never a great eater, had come from his bunk unshaved and disreputable-looking and was seated before a cup of coffee. Tillman and Houghton, fresh from their tub and filled with the good spirits of youth, were talking and laughing, and Jacky, having served the food, had skipped on deck again on Hull's order to keep a look-out for anything he might see.

The *Barracuda*, rolling gently to the swell, kept up a continuous whine, cordage, blocks, spars and timbers all lending voice.

"She don't like hanging idle," said Tillman, "but there's no use in her grumbling. The glass is steady, for one thing."

"Ay, it's steady enough," said Hull. "I'd sooner see it dropping a bit, ca'ms like this get on my spine, for why I don't know. It's maybe becos I was laid up in one once in the old *Monterey*, a three master, she were, forty days out of London bound for Durban. Head winds right to Bathurst and a dead flat ca'm on the line. There we lay and rotted two weeks, short o' water, and seventeen dozen sharks pokin' their noses round her stern."

At half-past eleven that day—three bells—Tillman, who was rigging up an awning with the help of a spare sail, had his attention drawn to Hull, who was standing shading his eyes with his hand and staring over the sea to port.

Tillman left his work and looked. A quarter of a mile, or less, away, a strange oily patch was visible on the surface of the water and even as he gazed, suddenly, a little burst of foam broke the sea surface.

He had no time to speak before Hull was on him.

"We're driftin' on to shoals," cried Hull. "Get the boat out for towin', it's our only chance." He rushed to the cabin hatchway and called to the fellows below, then, turning, and helped by Jacky and Tillman, he began lowering the boat; when she was

water-borne and floating alongside he looked round.

"Where's Mac?" he cried.

"He hasn't come up yet," replied Houghton.

Hull turned, went to the cabin companion-way and dived below, a sound of shouting and struggling was heard and next moment Macquart, crimson in the face and seeming half strangled, was literally shot upwards on deck as though blown by an explosion.

Hull on going below had found Macquart lying in his bunk reading an old copy of the *Bulletin*. Ordered on deck and refusing the order, he had found himself suddenly seized, half-throttled, and thrust up the hatchway.

All the animosity of Hull for this old time partner of his, all the hatred which he suppressed and kept under and glozed over with fair or jesting words had suddenly blazed out. Tillman, though he had little time to think, recognised this fact and took a momentary chill at the sight of the fury that had dwelt among them, hid away and sealed, suddenly unbottled like this.

Seizing Macquart by the scruff of his neck, Hull rushed him to the port bulwarks till the buttons of his coat clashed against the rail.

"Over you get," he cried.

Next moment Macquart was in the boat, the tow rope was made fast and she forged ahead, Tillman, Jacky, Macquart and Houghton at the oars.

Hull remained on board shouting directions and attending to the tow ropes.

As Tillman rowed, some instinct prompted him

to take a peep over the gunnel of the boat. In the brilliant water and seeming only a few yards beneath the surface he saw rocks streeling fantastic and variegated weeds to the tide.

Few things could be more disturbing than that sight here, far from land and seemingly in the midst of the deep, deep ocean. It had a touch of the uncanny, and the swell made it more terrifying still; for the swell, though so widespaced as scarcely to be noticeable, had the lift and fall of a fathom, so that now the rocks would be clear-viewed and now more vague, and nothing is more soul-searching than that trick of the sea when it is played upon one in mid-ocean. But the work on hand gave little time for thought. Of all the labours of the sea, towing is the most heart-breaking when the tow is of any size and unless the towing boat is properly manned. They were unused to this special work; the idle life on board the *Barracuda* had put them out of training and the heat of the sun was terrific.

Macquart suffered even more than the others, being older and having less use of his muscles.

Tillman, who rowed stroke, kept his eye on Hull and took his orders, and the *Barracuda*, now with her head turned away from the threatened danger, was making slow progress almost due east.

"There's a baling tin somewhere in the bottom of the boat," said Tillman, "fetch it up, one of you, and give us a sluice all round."

Houghton found it and did as he was told, and then the weary work went on.

After nearly an hour of it, dazed, beaten, with scarcely an ounce of energy left, they were suddenly brought to life and full consciousness by a hail from the Captain.

A breeze was coming up from the southward. A huge violet fan of ruffled water was spreading towards the *Barracuda*, still prisoned in the dead, crystalline calm.

They laid the boat alongside and scrambled on board just as the breeze touched the canvas and the main boom swung to starboard. Hull had unlashed the wheel and when they were on deck he ordered the boat to be streamed astern.

"No time to waste pickin' her up till we're clear of this tangle," he shouted. "Get to your places."

The mainsail had been set with two reefs in it for fear of a sudden squall, the reefs were shaken out, then foresail and flying jib were set and the *Barracuda* began to talk. Making six knots and with the dancing boat following her like a dog on a lead, she drew off steadily to the east nor'east, leaving the region of shoals and reefs behind her.

Hull kept the lead going at intervals. Then when he considered all clear water ahead he brought the boat in and set a course to the northward. He had taken command of the *Barracuda*. Without a word to Tillman or the others, he had stepped into the position of chief man on board and leader of the expedition.

When the boat was secured, Hull, who was now at the wheel, began to talk.

"We've been near done for by lazing and bad

seamanship," said he. "That was a point of the Barrier Reef, which means to say we're out of our course by scores of miles, and that's your fault, Tillman. I should a' took the sun myself and worked the reckonin'. No use in complainin' now, we've got to make right and there's no manner o' use talkin'. Then, again, the watches are all upside down, we've kep' no proper look out, chaps have been lyin' in their bunks that ought to a' been on deck. That's got to be set right. Now, then, you, whater you goin' below for?"

"I'm going to fetch my pipe," said Macquart, who had his foot on the top step of the cabin companionway.

"You stay here on deck till I've finished talkin'," said Hull. "You've got to do your bit along with the rest of us and no skulkin'. Up with you and stand there by Jacky. I'm going to pick watches with Mr. Tillman."

Macquart obeyed.

"I takes Mac," said Hull.

"And I take Houghton," said Tillman.

"Right you are," said the Captain, "and Jacky can help as wanted. Now, then, Mr. Tillman, you can go below with the starboard watch, and you, Mac, can go down and fetch your pipe and don't you be two minits huntin' for it, or I'll come after you and liven you."

As Macquart went below, Houghton caught the glance he shot at Hull and at the same time a glimpse of the enmity that lived between these two men.

CHAPTER X

TORRES STRAITS

THEY passed Latitude 15° S. and entered the Coral Sea, the weather growing warmer and the sea bluer day by day and the nights more tremendous with stars.

To Houghton the farther they went the more did the world of the tropics open like some vast and mysterious azure flower. The steamer that brought him to New South Wales had shewn him little of the true mystery of this world of the sun, but here in the *Barracuda* so close to the sea, so dependent on the winds, so touched by the sun, life became a new thing and the world a wonderland.

Nautilus fleets passed them and the foam flickers flung from the forefoot of the yawl looked like marble shavings on the lazulite of the sea. White gulls chased them and flittered like snowflakes against the burning azure of the sky, and ever and ever the warm, tepid wind from the south or east of south pursued them whilst the *Barracuda* snored to it, lifting her stern to the heave of the swell and filling the hull with the whispering and slapping of the bow wash.

Black fish walloped along, sometimes, as though racing them, and gulls, fish, nautilus fleets and wind

all seemed bound and hurrying in the same direction—the Line; the very sea that bore the *Barra-cuda* seemed racing towards the same goal, as though the world and all in it were pressing forward to some great carnival of colour and light.

One evening they sighted Banks Island swimming in a pearly haze on the far horizon.

Banks and Malgrave Islands stand out in Torres Strait from the point of Cape York like twins.

"That's Banks," said Hull; "it's not the first time I seen it. What you say, Mac?"

"Well," said Macquart, "if you are sure of it what's the good of asking me—yes, it's Banks Island right enough."

"Well, then, why can't you say so like a Christian?" flared out Hull. "Blest if you ain't growin' more like a m'hogany image every day."

"We're nearly into the Straits," cut in Tillman, who had been looking at the chart; "isn't it a bit dangerous to hold on like this at night? How would it be to heave to off the coast till morning?"

"Heave to?" said Hull. "Why, it's a'most a full moon and she rises less than an hour after sundown; no, sir, we'll 'old as we are and run the Straits with the help o' the wind. I've no notion of hangin' about waitin' for another ca'm or maybe a gale to pile us on them rocks; glass is steady, but glass or no glass I'm goin' to push on. I'm mighty anxious to raise that river."

Jacky was at the wheel. Houghton, belonging to Tillman's watch, was below. They went down, and Hull, getting the charts on the table, laid them

out. There was the big chart of the New Guinea coast and Torres Straits and the track chart shewing their course and Banks Island.

Hull pondered over the big chart on which was marked the point of disembogement of Macquart's river.

"When we pass Banks," said he, "we'll be a hundred and eighty or maybe two hundred miles from the river mouth; allowin' for current and not wishin' to pile her on the reefs, I take it we'll be nosin' into the mouth of that river day after to-morrer mornin'. *If* the wind holds. It's just on the edge of Dutch Guinea. Y'see, up here, if the chart shewed it, would be the Fly River, that's all British. Well, Mac, you'll have some pilotin' to do day after to-morrer mornin'."

Macquart's eyes were singularly bright and he seemed to have shaken off the black dog that had been on his back for the last week or so. Maybe it was the near approach to the scene of his dreams or maybe it was some other cause, but cheerfulness had him in her keeping.

Houghton, who had tumbled out of his bunk to help in the consultation, noticed the fact.

"Yes," said Macquart, "I seem to smell the place already, and I'm thinking you'll have your work cut out too, towing her up unless the wind is dead astern."

"We'll do our endeavours," said the Captain. "And now whiles we've got the chance with a good offin' and nuthin' to trouble us, let's lay our dispositions. It's fifteen years and more since you've

been up that river, Mac—Oh, I know all that yarn of how you got the chart and location from a chap named Smith, but we'll suppose you was one of Lant's crew—we're all gentlemen here together and there's no use in hidin' things up. I don't want to get at none of your secrets, they wouldn't be no use to me, but what I do want to know is this: How were them natives disposed that time you were here, were they a fightin' lot of mugs ready to play their souls for coloured beads?"

"The natives are all right," said Macquart, "if they are treated right."

Houghton, who had heard Macquart's story as told to Curlewis, felt aghast at Macquart's cool acceptance of Hull's suggestion that Macquart had been one of Lant's crew. If that were so, then it was almost certainly Macquart who had assisted Lant in the sinking of the *Terschelling* with her crew aboard, and who had, in turn, done away with Lant himself.

"Well," said Hull, "we must leave it at that. I've never more than snuffed the New Guinea coast, but whether they're friendly or not we've got the arms and the bullets to down them with if they make trouble. Now we'll go over them. Mr. Tillman, will you fetch out your rifles and small arms for an overhaul?"

Tillman went to the locker where the arms were stored.

He had arranged with Screed for the arming of himself, Houghton and Macquart. There were

three Winchesters and three Savage automatic pistols with ammunition.

He brought them to the table, and Hull having cleared away the charts, the weapons were placed on it for inspection. The ammunition was kept in another locker. Tillman fetched the cases of cartridges and placed them by the rifles.

Hull made a careful examination of the lot; then he said:

"There's a rifle and a pistol apiece for us three. Mac here is not a fighting man, his business is to nose out the stuff, our business is to stand by with the guns. Did you ever by any chance see chaps out shootin' with a dog? The dog noses out where the birds is hid and the chaps with the guns stand by to fire. Well, Mac's our dog—ain't you, Mac?"

Macquart made no reply for a moment, then he laughed:

"You can put it like that," said he. "Well, what more's to be done?"

The Captain loaded one of the automatic pistols and put it in his pocket with a packet of cartridges. Then he loaded the two others and gave one to Houghton and one to Tillman, also a packet of cartridges apiece.

"Being nearly on the spot," said he, "it's time for us to get ourselves in trim—the rifles can go back in the locker and I'll keep the key." He placed the Winchesters and ammunition in the locker and pocketed the key.

As they went on deck Houghton recognised that what had just taken place was not only the arming

of himself and his companions, but the disarming of Macquart.

He took Tillman aside. The moon had just risen and was hanging like a great shield of burnished brass above the eastern sea line. Banks Island lay on the port quarter and before them Torres Straits lay spread in the mysterious light of the new risen moon and the waxing stars.

"Tillman," said Houghton, "did you hear what the Captain said to Macquart?"

"I did," said Tillman.

"You remember Macquart's tale, how John Lant, the Captain of the *Terschelling*, took his ship up the river, cached the gold and then sank the ship with the crew in the fo'c'sle and how one of the crew, John Smith, had helped him?"

"I do."

"How Lant married a native woman, Caya."

"Chaya," corrected Tillman.

"Yes, Chaya—and how Smith did away with Lant, and then had to escape without the gold because Chaya suspected him."

"Yes."

"Well, Smith was Macquart."

"It looks like it."

"Macquart it was that helped in the sinking of the ship, it was Macquart who did away with John Lant. It's as plain to me as that moon. My God, Tillman, if I had known I'd never have come on this expedition."

"There's no use worrying now," said Tillman. "We're here and we have to go through with it even

if we are bound to go hand-in-hand with a murderer."

"There's more still," said Houghton. "I see now why Macquart let fifteen years go by without returning to look for that gold."

"Why?"

"Why? Can't you see? Lant's wife, that native woman, Chaya, was after him for his life when he escaped; he would not have dared to return till she was dead or had forgotten him. He told me a yarn—he told us all—that he had been years hunting about the world before he could get any one to join him in an expedition; that was bunkum. The plain truth is that he had not the courage to go back, he was afraid of this woman. I feel it by instinct that he is afraid even now. But fifteen years is a long time and he reckons that she is either dead or, if alive, that she will not recognise him."

"If she is alive, and if she recognises him, we'll never leave that river with our heads on us," said Tillman.

"You have put it exactly," replied Houghton. "But I'm not afraid of that. I don't lay much store by life; what daunts me is Macquart."

"How?"

"He makes my stomach crawl, he seems to me now the incarnation of everything evil. I hate to be on the same boat with him. He's a nightmare."

"He's not a bad imitation," said Tillman. "And the funny thing is that up till a few weeks ago he was a pleasant enough fellow. He's been slowly

getting disagreeable, somehow, though he has done nothing and said nothing much; it's as if there was something in the sea air or the life aboard that has made the badness in the blighter ooze out without his knowing it—then this business to-night puts a cap on everything."

"I'm afraid of him and that's the truth," said Houghton. "I'm not funkng anything he may do to me or to us. I'm afraid of him just as a man is afraid of a ghost or a devil. I've often heard parsons talk of Evil and Wickedness and all that, but I've never felt the thing till now. Yes, he seemed all right at first; that morning I met him in the *Domain* he fascinated me same as a fairy tale might fascinate one—but now—ugh!"

"Well, there's no use in bothering about that," replied the other. "If you're out on the gold trail you can't expect saints along with you, there's nothing collects devils like gold. The thing for us to do now we are forewarned is to be forearmed. We have to keep a precious sharp eye on this chap, for I tell you it's my humble opinion he'd do the lot of us in just for the pleasure of the business, leaving alone the profit. He hates Hull like all possessed, and Hull's got the bulge on him. Did you notice how neatly the Captain has left him without a gun—Hull's a peach."

"I tell you," said Houghton earnestly, "that though I'm afraid of this chap, just because of what's in him, the thing I'm really afraid of, as far as our success and safety go, is not Macquart but the woman—if she's alive."

"Well, let's hope she's dead," said Tillman.

He shaded his eyes and looked ahead. Houghton, looking in the same direction, saw a smudge on the sea and in the midst of it a spark of light.

"It's a steamer," said Tillman.

He called Hull, who was standing by the wheel, to look.

"She's coming up fast," said the Captain. "A lot too fast for a freighter; she's the *Hong Kong*, Brisbane mail boat, most like; well, them that are fond of steam may use it, but give me masts and yards. Now there's half-a-dozen chaps in brass bound hats aboard that hooker as 'd turn up their noses at the likes of you and me, but give 'em a head wind and half a sea and what are they on? a shower bath. Swep' fore and aft they'd be. I've had one turn as foremast hand on a Western Ocean tank and I was swimmin' most of the way to N' York. Look at her."

She was passing a quarter of a mile away. A big white-painted boat, grey in the moonlight, crusted with lights and with the green starboard light staring full at the little *Barracuda*.

A faint strain of music came across the water with the murmur of the engines.

"They'll be after their dinner," said Hull, "with the ladies sitting on the deck and chaps in b'iled shirts smokin' cigars over them. I've been deck hand on a Union boat for a voyage and I've seen 'em and I'd sooner be greaser on a Western Ocean cattle truck than first officer on one of them she-male boats. There's some sense in cattle."

Houghton watched whilst the big liner pounded away into the moonlight and star shimmer of the night. That glimpse of civilisation was inexpressibly strange seen here from the deck of the *Barra-cuda*, bound upon the wildest of adventures and surrounded by the wastes of the tropic sea.

CHAPTER XI

THEY SIGHT THE RIVER

THE Java Sea, the Banda Sea, and the Arafura Sea, all locked in by the Sunda Islands, North Australia, Borneo, the Celebes and New Guinea, form a lake almost bluer than the Caribbean, almost as romantic.

Never despise Trade. The Romance of Adventure is written on the tablets prepared by the traders of the world, and in the go-downs of Macassar, the trading houses of Batavia and on the wharves of Malacca you will find more of the spirit of the Real Thing Worth Living For than in the wildest book of Adventures ever written, and no spot in the world more starred with high doings in the cut and thrust line than just here.

Torres Straits is the highway between the Arafura Sea and the Pacific. In the old sandal-wood days and in the early times when the Dutch were greater in the east than they are now and the prahu of piratical Dayaks more active, Torres Straits was the scene of many a bloody fight, unrecorded, between the merchant adventurers of Holland and the Islanders who did not care a button about money so long as they got heads.

Through this wilderness of blue with the long,

low line of the New Guinea coast on the horizon to starboard, the *Barracuda* was steering, Houghton at the wheel and Tillman beside him.

It was nine o'clock in the morning, the wind was almost due south and they reckoned to strike the coast where the river disembogued before noon; nothing shewed but the coast-line and an oil tank almost hull down to windward and a gull flickering dark against the sea blaze astern.

"Well," said Tillman. "We've done it pretty near. To think of us three in the bar at Lamperts' a few weeks ago talking of the thing, without the seeming ghost of a chance of pulling it through, and now to think of us here, nosing through Torres Straits without having lost a spar, right on the business like a hawk. I tell you, Houghton, if I wasn't a modest man I'd be proud of myself."

"We've had good luck," said the man at the wheel, "and Luck's a jolly good thing to have with one if it wasn't so changeable. We're here, but we have all our work cut out before us."

Tillman whistled.

"We have begun well," went on Houghton, "but we have all the stuff on board for an explosion between Macquart and Hull; even if we have the best of Luck and this woman is dead or doesn't recognise Macquart there's likely to be trouble between those two. They hate each other like poison. Hull's a good chap, I think, though he might be better; anyhow, he's a long, long chalk better than the other, but I can't understand him. He doesn't fight openly with Macquart, but he's all the time

jeering at him under the pretence of making fun and when he has a chance doesn't he work him—we can't afford that sort of thing on an expedition like this."

"Well, there's no use in worrying," said Tillman. "All we've got to do is to keep our eye on the moment and do our best. You're letting her off the course."

Houghton flushed and put the helm over a few spokes. Tillman had a lot of common sense, though up to this no one would have suspected this, and his rebuke was all the more severe because deserved. Worrying about the future becomes a crime when it detracts from the business of the moment and lets the ship off the course.

At three bells, the whole crew being on deck and the coast close up to them, Hull, who had been looking through the glass, handed it to Macquart.

"That's the rock you spoke of if I ain't mistaken," said Hull.

Macquart looked through the glass.

"That's the rock," said he.

He kept the glass to his eye for a full half-minute, then he handed it to Tillman.

Tillman took a peep at the object in question.

It was a remarkable feature on that flat shore, where the mangrove trees crept down literally to the edge of the reef-protected water.

The whole coast-line seemed reef-protected, and in the sun blaze the foam breaking on the reefs shewed like snow.

"Well," said Hull, "it's not invitin', but there's

the rock, anyway, as you said it would be, and it's up to you, Mac, to pilot us in."

"Keep her as she goes," said Macquart.

As pilot, the command of the *Barracuda* was now in his hands and Hull was his servant, but he did not "swell himself," to use Hull's expression. He had the appearance of a man deeply absorbed in some fateful speculation and he drew apart from the others, his eyes fixed on the coast and sometimes cast anxiously to windward.

The wind held steady, almost due south, and now with the Pulpit Rock coming abreast of them, Macquart gave an order, the spokes of the wheel flew to starboard and the *Barracuda*, with the main boom swung out and sailing dead before the wind, headed for the shore.

Hull, shading his eyes with the sharp of his hand, saw the great black break in the reefs they were making for. It was the break where the river disembogued and he pointed it out to Tillman.

"That's the river, anyway," said he, "*and* a fair wind to take us up. I reckon Mac's no fool. Up to this I've never been sure of him, but he's made good so far."

"Yes, we haven't got on badly up to now," said Tillman.

As they drew closer in, the reef opening spread wider before them, and the *Barracuda*, going before the wind, took the gentle swell with the light and buoyant motion of a balloon; the foam bursts of the reefs shewed a long way to port and starboard as they passed the reef ends and now, the

land close up on either hand, the river lay before them like a sheet of gold.

Houghton stood speechless before the strangeness and beauty of this place so remote and so different from any place he had seen before. Save for the great rock standing like a sentinel and swarmed about by gulls, the land shewed nothing but foliage, the dark green of mangroves dreaming upon their water-shadows, the emerald fronds of palm, the wind-stirred masses of the dammar, cutch and camphor, wildernesses on either side the river; all these held a charm mysterious as the charm of the river itself flowing in stereoscopic stillness from the mysterious land beyond.

It was here that the *Terschelling* came in all those years ago, either under sail if the wind was favourable, or towed or warped up that bright waterway to her last anchorage, with John Lant directing operations and Macquart, no doubt, assisting as deck hand.

It was away up there in the mysterious country that she was sunk with all hands bottled in the fo'c'sle after the gold had been safely cached. It was up there that Macquart, according to all probability, had done John Lant in, and, profiting nothing by his crime, had escaped with his bare life from the place to which he was now stealing back.

For a moment, as these thoughts occurred to Houghton, the whole brilliant scene before him became tinged with gloom and tragedy and Macquart a figure of horror; for a moment, as they passed the river mouth and took the gentle current of the

half-mile broad stream, a hand seemed thrust against his breast and a voice seemed to cry, "Be-gone!" And then, flashing by him came a thing like a lady's jewelled aigrette—it was a humming bird, and following this vision came a vague trace of perfume from the tree wilderness of the banks. The feeling passed from Houghton's mind, the warning was forgotten—the river had taken him in the toils of its fascination.

"The tide is with us," said Macquart.

They had struck the reef opening shortly after the turn of the tide. It was a tidal river and against the slackened current they now made way almost as well as in the open sea.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAGOON

TILLMAN was at the wheel and Macquart, calling Jacky, ordered him to take Tillman's place. Then he led the others a bit forward.

"Now," said he, "here's the river. Have I spoken rightly? Have I judged rightly? I have brought you nearly to the spot and it all depends on the decision we take now whether we pull this thing through or not.

"The village lies on the left bank, maybe six or more miles up—say seven, the waterway is broad and we can get the *Barracuda* up easy enough; well, we mustn't take her that far, we mustn't take her more than another mile or two up. We've got to tie her somewhere on the bank, somewhere secure and hidden, and go on to the village in the boat."

"Good Lord," said Tillman, "what are you saying? Leave the *Barracuda* and maybe have her run away with?"

"I tell you," said Macquart, "it's not safe. You haven't thought the thing out as I have. If we tie up by the village what will happen if there's a row? If we have to escape in a hurry? You can

easily push a boat off, but you can't easily get the yawl away."

"There's truth in what he says," put in Hull. "But who can we leave with her?"

Macquart shrugged his shoulders.

"Leave with her? No one. There's no one here to touch her. Only the monkeys—they won't harm her."

"And what are we to say to the chaps at the village?"

"Say that we have left our ship down the river; that very fact will give us extra protection."

"One moment," said Tillman. He drew Houghton aside and they both went into the bow.

"What do you think of this?" said Tillman. "Is it some trick of Macquart's or what?"

"No," said Houghton. "The chap's frightened right enough and he's thinking of his own skin. If these people in the village are the same as he left there fifteen years ago and if that woman is still alive, and if they recognise him, well, you see, there'll be a shindy right off—that's what it is. Better do as he says; he's playing for safety, not against us."

"I'm your way of thinking," said Tillman.

They turned aft.

"Well," said Hull, "what have you decided?"

"Tie up," said Tillman. "It's the safest way, but the question is, where?"

"Oh, that's easily found," said Macquart. "You wait."

About two miles from the mouth they opened

what seemed the mouth of another river on the left bank, and Macquart ordered the mainsail to be lowered and the boat got out for a tow.

"It's a lagoon," said he, "as good as a harbour, nothing will touch her in there. She'd lie to the Day of Judgment, and they wouldn't find her then. Now, out with the boat, sharp, we don't want to drift."

They lowered the boat, the tow rope was fixed, and Macquart was the first man into her. Tillman, Houghton and Hull followed him, leaving Jacky on board to steer.

Macquart was right. Through the opening in the left bank, the river bayed out into a lagoon. A still sheet of water on which the columns of the nipah palms lining the banks were reflected as in a mirror. The tropical forest festooned with lianas and wild convolvulus came down to the water's edge. At night, and especially on a night of the full moon, this place would be filled with the chanting of birds, the girding and guggling and yooing of monkeys and the cry of prowling beasts. Now, in the full blaze of day, it was silent, with the silence of a room locked up from the world.

Things like red moths were flitting hither and thither across the water surface just as you have seen the mayflies flit across a brook. Houghton, glancing up from the labour of rowing, saw that the moths were birds; tiny red humming birds with needle-sharp bills, hundreds and hundreds of them dancing and flitting in the sunshine.

When they had brought the *Barracuda* a hun-

dred yards or so within the lagoon they boarded her and dropped the anchor in two fathom water. Then, taking to the boat again and armed with a sounding lead, they started out to hunt for a berth.

They found an ideal one on the left hand side counting from the point of entrance. Here for the space of seventy feet or so the bank came down sheer to the water without any shelving and with a depth of three fathoms, whilst the lower branches of the huge trees were sufficiently high to clear the mainmast of the *Barracuda* if the topmast were struck.

"We can moor her to them trees," said Hull. "Yes, it's a likely spot and might 'a' been laid out on purpose; easy to get her in and easy to get her out, and no harbour dues. Now, then, all aboard and let's get done with it."

They struck the topmast of the yawl, lowered the mainsail and mizzen, and, having made everything snug, towed her to the bank. It was after sundown when everything was complete and, tired out, they went down to the cabin for supper.

Down below, it seemed to Houghton the strangest thing to be sitting there at table, landlocked and moored up to trees after the long, long weeks of sea tossing and the eternal noise of the bow wash and the booming of the waves. The others did not seem to notice the change.

Hull, who had retaken charge of things, now that Macquart had finished with the piloting, was laying down their future plans.

"We'll lay up here to-morrer," said he, "to rest

and stretch our legs, and the day after to-morrer, bright and early, we'll man the boat and start for the village. Now it's in my mind when we've made good with the village people and tapped the cache and made sure the stuff's there, it will be best to bring the yawl right up. You see, if we leave her here, we'll have to bring the stuff down by boat-loads."

Macquart, who had retired into himself all through the voyage as though the presence of Hull had paralysed his initiative, rose from the table, sat down on one of the bunk edges and nursed his knee.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, as though he were addressing a meeting, "I am not with Captain Hull. I believe I have some right to give an opinion, considering the fact that this expedition was originated by me and that I alone have the key to the cache."

Hull grumbled something unintelligible and Macquart went on:

"Besides, I have thought the matter out most carefully, and it is for your good, as well as my own, that I say the *Barracuda* must remain here right through this business."

"Oh, she must, must she?" said Hull. "Seems to me you're beginnin' to lay the law down, Mac. None of us is to say a word but take your leadin' like baa lambs. D'you think you're the only one of the lot of us rigged with eyes and understandin'? I say that when we touch this stuff we'll bring the yawl up to load it and if the niggers give trouble we'll hold them down with our guns; why, you blessed

skimshanker, it'd take a dozen journeys up and down with a boat; we'd have to go with the boat each journey, and who's to be left at the cache to protect the stuff?"

Houghton noticed all through this conversation that Macquart's eyes were steadily fixed on Hull and that his face had been growing pale under its bronze. He had guessed the hatred that existed between the two men, but he failed to plumb the depth and intensity of the passion surging in the breast of Macquart.

Leaving aside all old scores, Hull had got the better of him at the start of the expedition. Macquart, the cock of the walk and boss of the business, with two greenhorns to work for his ends and a sound boat under his feet, had suddenly found himself hampered and checkmated by the inscrutable Screed.

Macquart was one of those sinister men of whom we can say only this, that their plans are never more dark than when they seem most luminous. He had felt Tillman and Houghton to be putty in his hands, and Jacky a black pawn to be played with as he chose, and though it is impossible to define his exact plan of campaign, already prepared no doubt on the night when he agreed to divide the treasure so generously with Screed, Houghton and Tillman, one may be sure of this, that the division of the treasure had no part in it. Half a million in gold coin and bullion! Screed two thousand miles away and only Tillman and Houghton to deal with and bamboozle—or worse! All the elements lay here

for a coup for a genius to pull off and Macquart—as will be seen—if not a genius, was at least a superlatively clever and astute man.

Screed had fancied that the final disposal of the treasure would prove such an insuperable obstacle to villainy that Macquart would be driven to return to Sydney to “cash it.” Screed, the clever business man with no illusions and no beliefs, had divined Macquart and his possibilities and had not felt *quite* sure that the latter would find the disposal of the treasure an impossible task and so be driven back to Sydney. Not being quite sure, he played his trump card, Hull.

So it came about that Macquart on the point of sailing, found suddenly dumped on him the big, strong man he feared and hated, the man who knew exactly what sort of character he was, and the man who, having been twice diddled by him, was evidently determined never to be so treated again.

Then Hull had taken virtual command of the expedition and he had worked Macquart like a dog. The explosion that now followed was the result of all this.

Macquart sprang from the edge of the bunk and stood upright before the Captain.

“D——n you,” he cried. “Who are you to be meddling and ordering and interfering in what you don’t understand,—wharf rat sprung from nowhere, shot aboard by that —— Screed. You leave this thing alone or I’ll chuck it; one word more from you and you can hunt for the stuff yourself, you —— ———.”

He was shouting at the top of his voice and Hull had drawn back a moment and was preparing to strike when Tillman and Houghton flung themselves between the antagonists, forcing Macquart back on the bunk and Hull to the other side of the table.

"Don't be fools," cried Tillman. "Good Lord, the idea of fighting amongst ourselves in our position. Can't you see there's no use in arguing what we'll do till we've touched the stuff?"

"Let up," said the Captain, who had recovered possession of himself. "I'm not goin' to touch the blighter—but one word more of his lip and I'll break his neck. There, that's said and done. Let him sit there and cool." He turned and went on deck, where Tillman and Houghton followed him.

The moon had risen and the lagoon water half-veiled by a faint mist lay spread to the bosky shadows of the trees lining its banks.

To Houghton it seemed that he had never seen a place so secretive and vaguely sinister as this sheet of water hemmed in by the tropical forest now buzzing and thrilling and chattering with the night life of the woods.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLACK SHIP

NEXT morning at breakfast all signs of the quarrel had disappeared. Macquart seemed cheerful and the Captain had got into the old bantering way of talking to him. He did not seem to resent it. After breakfast, they set to work to make everything snug and secure on board. They brought the topmast down and lashed it with the spare spars on deck, stowed away everything movable, even to the collapsible boat, and put ashore extra mooring ropes. Then they collected on deck the stores for the boat expedition, canned meat and vegetables, blankets, a tent, matches, ammunition and a small parcel of trade, consisting of stick tobacco, knives, dollar watches and clay pipes.

The lazaret was carefully secured and every locker fastened, and an hour or two before sundown all the preparations were finished for the start on the morrow.

"Well, that's done," said Tillman, as he surveyed their work. "Nothing will move her except, maybe, an earthquake or a tornado." He filled his pipe and lit it. Houghton also produced a pipe, whilst Hull, perspiring from the work he had been upon, went

below for a drink. Macquart had taken his seat on deck and was engaged in mending a rent in his trousers. He was often patching himself up like this. In Sydney, he could have borrowed the money from Screed for a full outfit, or got it on credit from the outfitter of the expedition, but he had come away with only a few things, perhaps from carelessness or from some strange twist of the mind making him utterly regardless of appearances.

"Come out on the water," said Tillman to Houghton; "it's cooler out there and we can explore round a bit."

They got into the boat which was lying alongside and pushed out into the lagoon.

The sunlight was striking the water across the tree-tops, and the trees of the southern bank threw their cave-like shadow far out on the water; against this shadow the moth-like dance of the humming birds patterned itself with an effect at once gorgeous and ghostly.

This place was the paradise of birds; the gorgeous collared lory preened itself on the lower branches of the trees by the water, answering with its beaver-like noise the *ka-ka-toi*, *ka-ka-toi* of the white cockatoos haunting the groves; the wonderful crowned pigeon flitted across from bank to bank; fork-tailed water chats and blue flycatchers flew everywhere, and, as the boat floated along skirting the shadows, kingfishers like birds carved from emerald shewed motionless as sentries perched on drift logs by the banks.

They had rowed towards the south bank, and now

they sat smoking and letting the boat drift on the edge of the tree shadows.

Nothing is better than tobacco after labour; perhaps, after all, nothing in a material way is better than tobacco, that true "gift" of God to man.

Tillman was thinking as he smoked, and Houghton was engaged on the same line of thought as Tillman. The latter was the first to speak.

"I wish I could put a stopper on Hull in some way," said he. "He's been working Macquart up ever since we started; he won't let the chap alone; he keeps on at him, pretending to joke and sneering at him all the time."

"He's got a frightful down on him," said Houghton, "and I don't wonder; from what I can make out, Mac has bested him more than once. Hull told me something of what happened between them four years ago in 'Frisco. Macquart got away that time, and they didn't meet again till that morning, you remember, when we were coming from having our first look at the *Barracuda*. Seems like fate that they should have met just then."

"The world's a small place," said Tillman, "and that's the first thing that a scamp finds out. Hullo!"

The boat floating with the current that moved the lagoon water just here bumped gently against something and slowed round, nose to shore.

Tillman looked over.

"Why, it's all black rocks," said he. "No—it's not rocks; it looks like an old landing-stage of some sort sunk by the bank."

Houghton leaned over the starboard gunnel.

"Why, it's the bones of an old ship," said he, with a catch-back of his breath. "She's been burnt at her moorings, and we've hit one of her mast stumps."

He was right. Looking down through the water, the charred deck planking and bulwarks could be plainly made out. The planking had burst up here and there, shewing wide yawning holes through which the flames and smoke had once poured, before the seams had opened letting in the lagoon water to quench the flames; the bulwarks were all gone from the knight-heads to midships on the port side, and the upper planking also, so that the ribs stood up like piles.

Small fish were darting in and out of the gloomy cavern that had once been the main hold and a great eel waved its way from between the ribs and scuttled off along the lagoon floor as if resenting the presence of the gazers above. Not a sign of mast or spar was visible with the exception of the fore-mast stump with which the boat had collided.

The two men looked at one another.

"That's funny, isn't it?" said Tillman. "She must have been a fairly big ship."

"Maybe brought in here by pirates," said Houghton. "Looks as though the masts had been shot away."

"Oh, the fire would have done that," said Tillman. "I've seen a ship in Sydney Harbour with the masts clean gone through fire and not much sign of damage to the hull; you see, the standing rigging goes and the part of the mast below decks. If this

chap was burnt here, the main and mizzen masts most likely broke off, and once they were in the lagoon they would have floated away on the current."

"I don't know what it is," said Houghton, "but this lagoon makes me feel that I want to get away from it; funny, isn't it, but, from the first, I felt there was something crawly about it. It's just the place for river pirates to hide in, and I expect bloody work has gone on here long ago."

"Oh, the lagoon is all right," said Tillman. "One never can tell; this old hooker may have been a peaceful trader set a light to by some d—d fool messing round with a light, the same as the *Baralong* was burnt just outside the Heads."

"Maybe so," replied Houghton; "all the same, I don't like this place."

They rowed back to the yawl and reported their find, without raising any interest or speculation in Hull and Macquart.

"Some old tub scuttled for insurance, maybe," said Hull. "No, I ain't particular about goin' to look at her. I guess she'll keep. I'm goin' to turn in when I've had my supper, for we'll have to be off before sun-up, so's to reach the village in the cool of the day."

They had lit a fire on the bank to keep the mosquitoes off, though the mosquitoes here were far less troublesome than one might have expected, owing, perhaps, to the fact that the water was not stagnant.

Tillman threw some more sticks on the fire and

then they went below to supper, after which they turned in.

They were awakened by Jacky.

It was an hour before dawn, a slight wind had risen, blowing the mists from the lagoon, and as they came on deck the mist wreaths were passing off like the ghosts of scarfs, wreathing unseen forms and leaving great spaces of star-shot water frosted by the breeze.

They breakfasted hurriedly, and everything being stowed on board the boat, they got in and pushed off just as the first lilac of the dawn was touching the sky beyond the tree-tops.

When they reached the river, the wind was fresher and blowing with them, and before they had made half a mile upstream, the sun was blazing through the trees of the left bank and the parrots shouting at them from the branches.

Just at this hour, the river was lovely, fresh, fair and brilliant. Butterflies big as birds and gorgeous as flowers pursued them or flitted across the boat; azure butterflies like flakes of sky, butterflies of bronze and gold in whose broad wings were set little clear spaces like panes of mica.

A mile and a half or perhaps two miles above the lagoon, the river took a bend westward, and the right bank losing its trees shewed tracts of cane and tall grass, with here and there a great tree standing in isolation.

The left bank shewed still the edge of the eternal, unbroken forest, the forest just as it was when

Moses gave laws to Israel, just as it will be when all present things are forgotten.

Although it was so early in the morning, the heat of the sun was beginning to have its effect; the bend of the river had partially cut off the breeze from them, and the river itself, scarcely stirred by the movement of the air, lay mirror bright and blinding between the emerald of the canes and the gloom of the forest.

Four miles or so up from the lagoon they called a halt, and tied the boat to a treeroot on the forest bank.

"There's no use killing ourselves," said Hull. "This ain't no boat-race, and I'm crool stiff from sittin' for a month idle in that blessed old bath-tub of a *Barracuda*. Well, Mac, how are the indications goin'?"

"The village should be above the next bend," said Macquart. "It's on the left bank—that's this one, and it's fixed in a clearing among the trees, so that you can't mistake it."

"You seem to have it all laid down in your head," said Hull. "One might swear you'd been here before and taken the indications, and yet you only had them laid down for you by another chap; blest if I'd be able to hold all that in my intellect; but folk varies, there aren't two words about that."

Macquart said nothing in reply to this compliment, and Tillman felt more than ever sure that the river was quite familiar to him.

But the idea of the treasure had now got such

a clutch on the mind of Tillman that all other considerations were laid aside.

If Macquart had been a member of the crew of the *Terschelling*, if he had done all that he and Houghton suspected him of doing, what then? It was a question between Macquart and his Maker.

Besides, the whole thing was a suspicion, and no one would ever know the truth.

As to the treasure, in a very short time now it ought to be under their hands, if it existed, and that burning thought cast him into silence and sealed his mind to everything else.

But Houghton was not silent.

"It was a good long way to bring that ship up, wasn't it?" said he to Macquart.

"That depends how you look at it," said Macquart. "It seems a long way in a boat, but look at the current; it's nothing, scarcely a knot and a half. With a decent wind, a ship wouldn't take long coming up, and without a wind and with a full ship's company, warping and towing would be pretty easy work."

He yawned as if tired of the subject, and re-lit his pipe which had gone out.

They rested an hour, and then took to the oars again; keeping close to the bank, they cleared the next vague bend of the broad flowing river and a mile beyond Macquart, standing up in the boat and shading his eyes, gave an exclamation of surprise.

"That's the spot," said he, "by all indications; but there's a landing-stage—that's something new."

The words caused a chill in the hearts of his companions.

They did not know till this moment how completely they had put their faith in Macquart's ability to put his hand on the *cache*. The note of surprise in his voice was like a disturbing breath to their confidence.

He resumed his oar, and rowing feverishly they made the water foam in the wake of the boat, whilst the sound of the oars in the rowlocks carried far along the river.

It was the sound of the oars, perhaps, that brought to their view the first human figure sighted by them since leaving Sydney.

A man had come out on the landing-stage and was standing as if watching them, a white man dressed in dingy white drill and wearing a battered old five-dollar panama hat.

Houghton, as they drew close, thought he had never seen a more villainous-looking individual.

CHAPTER XIV

WIART

HE was unhealthily stout and of medium height; he wore black side-whiskers of the mutton-chop variety, and his fat white face had such a stamp of meanness and debauchery that even Hull, who was not an impressionable individual, felt, to use his own words, "put off."

"Hullo!" said the stranger, as they came rubbing up to the rotten piles of the stage. "Where have you come from?"

"Down the river," said Hull, fastening the painter to a stake, "and who might you be?"

"Oh, good Lord!" said the other. "Ask me something else; I've near forgotten my own name. Who might I be? Why, I'm the trader here. Rubber getting, that's my business, Wiart's my name. Got any lush in that boat of yours?"

A faint odour of gin and the manner and speech of the trader told their tale.

"Not a drop," said Hull, scrambling on to the stage whilst the others followed him. "We're a tee-total picnic. That your house?"

On the bank to the right hand of the stage stood a frame-wood house limewashed as to the walls; beyond the house, and in a great clearing amongst

the trees, lay a native village deserted except for a few goats and a stray dog or two.

"Yes, that's my house," said Wiart. "Come up and have a drink; that's the village, people are mostly at work—come 'long."

He led them to the front of the house, which was situated away from the river, and then into the main room, a place barely furnished with native mats and cane chairs, and wearing such a look of neglect and sordidness and so littered and dirty that the soul of Houghton turned against it.

An old beer crate, long emptied of its contents and filled with rubbish, stood in one corner. On the table stood a bottle of squareface, a tumbler of thick glass and a water-pitcher; a rifle hung on the wall opposite the door and in another corner lay a pile of old newspapers many months old. There were chairs for all, and they sat down, refusing the offer of drink, whilst Wiart, taking his seat at the table, poured himself out a stimulant.

Then he rolled cigarettes and smoked them whilst they talked.

Macquart did the questioning.

"There used to be a Dyak village just here," said Macquart.

"There is still," said Wiart, "but the Dyaks have nearly died out. Mostly Papuans now; they do the rubber getting. There's not more than twenty Dyaks left; rum lot they are, won't work; there's an old woman, she's the chief of them, and her daughter, she's a peach, and ten or twelve chaps and their wives and children. Their village lies in the

trees there to the left of the Papuan village—they fish mostly and hunt, and they're a holy terror to the other natives.—Gosh, yes—they use blow-pipes and go about with stabbing spears. And they take heads. You wouldn't believe it, but it's true. The young chaps before they get married go off and make a quarrel with some Papuan village somewhere near, and lay for one of the niggers, and kill him, and take his head. A Dyak girl won't look at a man unless he brings her a head. *Would* you think it now, these times, with trains and steamboats and missionaries and all such, and head-hunting going on under one's nose; not that I care, as long as they don't go for mine; but it's the *idea* of the thing that gets me. Head-hunting these days and a civilised man like me having to sit still in the middle of it—it's enough to drive a man to drink living cheek by jowl with such heathen, and they walk the world 's if they were God Almighty; look down on me they do, tie their fishing boats up to my landing-stage without as much as by your leave, or with your leave; and the old woman's the worst, she's a witch and holds the Paps in mighty terror of spells and such-like. I told the company—I work for a rubber company—they ought to be cleared out, but the company has no guts in them, *they* don't care as long as the profits hold good. I'm not going to stand it, I've stood it long enough, I have so."

Wiart, growing almost tearful, took another pull at his drink, and Macquart, who had been watching him, shot another question.

"How long has this trading station been here?" asked he.

"Oh, seven years or so," replied Wiart, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "There was a chap called Johnstone here before me; he was here four years and died of something or another. He was frightfully thick with the Dyaks; they used to talk to him in English; the old woman's daughter isn't a full Dyak either, mixed blood; she can talk a lot of English; I've talked to her, told her not to tie her boat to my steps and she sauced me back; that was after she refused to have any truck with me. D—d montybank of a nigger girl talking back at me like that."

"What's her name?" put in Houghton.

"Chaya, same as the old woman; she's the daughter, and the Lord knows who was her father; but she's a peach, all the same, there's no denying that."

Houghton glanced at Tillman.

"Do you make much money at this here business?" asked Hull.

"A mug's game," replied Wiart. "There's no money in it except maybe for the Company, and they have dozens of posts like this; even then we're done out by the chaps that can use niggers as they ought to be used in the other rubber districts; this is a Dutch company, a lot of —— fools!" His head began to droop, and his lower lip to turn down, his cigarette had gone out. Gin had him like a nurse and was lulling him to sleep; he started awake again and begged pardon, lit his cigarette, talked a bit more and then relapsed again, and during that re-

lapse the others filed out softly into the clean air of the natural world.

"He's been drinking hard, that chap," said Hull, "and he'll have the jim-jams if he's not careful. I don't ever want to smell gin again. Now then, Mac, let's get to business, the boat and the stuff in her will look after themselves. Is this the place, by your indications?"

"It is," said Macquart.

"Then," said Hull, "lead us to the spot where the cache is."

"One moment," said Macquart. "You surely don't want to go there in the broad light of day with some one maybe spotting us."

"Wiart's asleep," replied Hull, "and there's no one to look; what better do you want?"

"I tell you," replied the other, "that wood may be full of eyes; it's plain madness to go straight after landing to a spot that any one can follow us to."

"Maybe he's right," said Tillman. "The cache won't run away, it's been there long enough."

"Then what do you propose to do?" grumbled Hull.

"Get the tent and stores ashore," said Macquart, "and put up the tent somewhere among the trees; Jacky and one of us can sleep in Wiart's house, and three of us in the tent."

"Not me," said Tillman. "I'm not going to sleep in that gin palace."

"I'd sooner sleep in the boat," said Houghton.

"I'm—if I wouldn't sooner sleep in the river than

under the same roof with that graven image of d'lirium trimins," said Hull; "not me."

"Well, I'll sleep there, I'm not particular," said Macquart. "It's a roof, and anything is better than a tent."

They turned back to the boat.

Tillman, who was leading the way, reached the landing-stage first. He turned and called to the others to hurry up. Then, without a word, he pointed to something.

Moored to the stage by the boat lay a fishing canoe. A slim brown canoe with an outrigger. A paddle and a fish spear lay in it, also a spar with a brown sail.

Sign of owner there was none, and there was something fierce and savage in the form and appearance of this thing that struck the four adventurers like the zip of an arrow in a wood.

"You see," said Macquart, "it's just as well we were careful. That canoe has been following us, unless it has come from the upper river, which is unlikely." He looked into it more attentively, and saw a fish lying on the bottom board and half hidden by the mast and sail. It was a flying fish.

He pointed it out.

"I thought so. It has come up from the sea, and we didn't even glimpse it, though it must have been not far behind us."

"Well, it don't much matter," said Hull. "But it's just as well for us to keep our eyes open. Come along and get the stuff up. Fetch the tent along first and let's prospect for a place to fix it."

They carried the tent to a clearing in the trees to the left of the Papuan village and set it up. Then the rest of the boat's contents, including a spade and small pick-axe, were stored by the tent and covered with the boat's sail. The oars and the bailing tin were left in the boat.

"They'll be safe there," said Hull, "unless any one runs away with the boat, and even if they did, we can always tramp back down river to the yawl."

He ordered Jacky to light a fire and prepare a meal, and whilst this was being done, they strolled round the Papuan village.

The huts, thatched with sago palm leaves, were raised on piles about six feet from the ground; not a soul was visible, with the exception of one old woman, who was engaged in watching some goats. She seemed half idiotic and scarcely turned her head to look at the intruders, and they passed on, Hull leading the way.

As they were turning to go back, from the trees on the right suddenly appeared a form. It was the form of a girl.

She paused in the tree shadows and stood looking at them. She was clad in some light white material, cast loosely and gracefully about her, after the fashion of the Greek *himation*; one brown arm was exposed to the shoulders and a ray of light piercing the leaves above struck the copper bangle fixed above the elbow.

Houghton thought that he had never seen a more lovely picture.

She was lovely, a revelation, a dream, mysterious as the forest that had suddenly given her birth.

For a moment she stood, and then just as a dream, she vanished, the leaves re-took her, and now for the first time they saw that she had not been alone; the glimpse of a half-naked figure shewed through the leaves, the figure of a youth, supple and sinuous and graceful as a faun, then it vanished also and nothing shewed but the trees and the still-moving leaves.

"That's the gal," said Hull; "that's the peach the gin-man was yarning about; b'gosh, he was right!—she's an a-pricot." He spoke without enthusiasm, though with conviction. His temper had been brittle all the morning, and the feeling that the girl and young man had been spying on them did not improve it.

Houghton said nothing; the fact was being borne in on him that he had seen John Lant's daughter; Chaya, the girl half European, half Dyak, the child that had been born to Lant before he had come to his untimely end.

As they returned to the tent, they did not notice that the old woman who had been tending the goats had risen and was making off among the trees.

CHAPTER XV

THEY START TO DIG

WHEN they got back they found that Jacky had laid out some food and was squatting on his heels by the fire he had built close to the tent. He was boiling some water for tea. They drank tea at nearly every meal and they drank it sometimes between meals; it was their main stand-by, and the sight of the preparations for making it restored Hull's good-humour.

The Captain fell to on the food, as did Tillman. Houghton touched nothing, waiting for the tea. He had lost interest for the moment in food, in the expedition, in everything under the sun except the vision of the girl that still pursued him. It seemed to him that he had travelled the whole of his journey through life to arrive at this sight and this end. Fate had shewn him an absolutely new thing, and in one moment had led him into an absolutely new world.

When Goethe laid down the dictum that some element of disproportion is essential to beauty, he meant really to say that absolute and entrancing beauty is impossible without individuality. It must break away from type, leave the accepted rules, and,

without entirely ignoring them, create itself and in itself a new thing.

Where the others had only perceived a pretty girl, Houghton, who possessed the instincts and the eye of an artist, saw a thing miraculous and miracle-working. His mind had been a thousand leagues from women, he had fancied that he had done with women forever, and now, all at once, came to him the knowledge that until a few minutes ago he had never really seen a woman, had never even touched the fringe of that awful power that makes or breaks or binds a man forever.

The beauty of Chaya, as disclosed to him in that moment when her eyes, gazing at the group, had rested on him in turn, was a thing miraculous as though speech had come to the forest or voice to the sky depths above the trees. A whole world in himself of whose existence he had known nothing awoke in troublous life, never to sleep again.

And he had to sit now whilst the Captain, munching bully beef, expounded his ideas as to their future proceedings to Macquart and Tillman.

"I don't care a dump," said the Captain, "whether we're watched or whether we ain't; I'm goin' for that stuff to-night after sundown. Ain't we armed? My plan is this, once we make sure the stuff's in the cache, we'll move the tent there and camp over it, then at night times we can move the stuff off bit by bit to the boat. It'll take several journeys down to the yawl; or better still, we'll bring the yawl right up here, now we know the natives are well disposed, and load up here. Who's got a better plan than

that? Mac, you've got to bring us to the stuff to-night; I ain't goin' to be put off waitin'—what do you say, Tillman?"

"I'm with you," said Tillman. "We'll go and scratch the cache, and once we're sure the stuff's there, we'll bring the yawl right up; four of us can do that, leaving one behind to guard the boodle."

"Very well," said Macquart. "I'll lead you to the spot to-night."

Macquart had long dropped more than the vaguest pretence of acting in this affair under directions and plans given him by some one else. Had any of them taxed him with the fact that he had once belonged to Lant's crew and had assisted in the burying of the gold, I doubt if he would have bothered to refute the impeachment. Even if, as Curlew had guessed and Tillman supposed, he had been the instrument of Lant's death, why should he care; there were no witnesses, fifteen years had passed and Lant was no doubt forgotten, even by the natives.

"The *Terschelling* was sunk in the river close to the cache, you said?" spoke up Tillman, who was engaged now in lighting a pipe.

"Yes," said Macquart, "that's the story."

"They wouldn't have sunk her more than over her decks," went on Tillman. "There wouldn't have been water enough for more than that—some of her bones ought to be lying there still."

"Maybe they are," replied Macquart; "unless the wash of the river has swept them away."

"What a devil that Lant must have been," went

on Tillman. "You said he waited till all the crew but one man were in the fo'c's'le and then clapped the hatches on 'em?"

"That's the yarn," said Macquart.

Tillman seemed about to pursue the subject, then he seemed to think better of it.

There was no use in raking up this old business. The question whether this one man, who was not included in the general murder of the crew, had assisted in the murder or not was a question for him to settle with his Maker.

Tillman was certain in his own mind that this man had been Macquart, and he chose to leave it at that without further enquiry.

Towards evening, the Papuan rubber getters returned from work, and almost at the same time Dyak canoes began to arrive from the sea.

The Dyak fishermen as they passed on to their village scarcely noticed the new encampment, but the Papuans were more curious. Women and children came to look at the newcomers, and a few men, to whom Tillman presented tobacco.

"It's just as well to keep in with the beggars," said he, "and not one of us can speak their lingo. Did you ever see such a depressed-looking lot of savages—don't seem to have any sense—all slit ears and wrinkles."

"They're like that from screwin' up their faces against the sun," said Hull. "There, they're off; look, Wiart has come out; *ain't* he a sleepin' beauty; he looks as if he'd just woke up after another bout of delirium trimins."

Wiart had come out on his verandah, close to which the rubber gatherers had placed their baskets. The Papuans, who at the sight of him had drawn off from the new encampment, were now picking up their baskets and following the factor to a go-down among the trees, where the rubber would be weighed.

Hull and his companions watched this proceeding, and they noticed how carefully Wiart, at the scales, was attending to his work.

"Look at him," said Hull. "There you have a trader every time; nearly done in with drink he is, yet he's alive to his bizziness, which is diddling the niggers out of rubber. Them traders take the cake, they do so; you might cut 'em in pieces and all they'd say'd be 'bizziness.' I ain't a particular man, but I'd sooner berth with a——pirate than a trader; they're a fish-blooded lot, sharks in britches, that's what they are."

When the rubber weighing was over and the natives gone back to their village, Wiart approached the tent.

He seemed very much freshened up, and as he took his seat on the ground close to Hull and proceeded to light a cigarette, he began to talk. Earlier in the day, he had been so dazed with drink that he had accepted their statement of having come from down river without question. Now he threatened to shew more interest in their origin and intentions.

"It's good to see white faces again," said he,

licking the gum on the cigarette paper. "You're not come up here trading, are you?"

"No," said Hull; "we're prospectors."

"Oh, prospectors—and what, might I ask, are you prospecting for?"

"Oh, one thin' or nather," replied the Captain. "Metals mostly."

"Well, I don't know there's any metals worth turning up the ground for," said Wiart; "and if there was, you'd find it difficult working any mine; you'd have to import labour, for one thing—where's your ship?"

"She's lyin' off and on," replied Hull, "mostly on—— We're a private-owned party, and we haven't come up the river to sell information, but to look after our own bizziness, same as you are lookin' after yours."

"Oh, I don't want to put my nose into your affairs," said Wiart. "You can prospect as much as you want, it's no affair of mine. This isn't my river, but I'll be glad to do what I can for you—where do you propose to sleep?"

It had been suggested by Macquart earlier in the day that he and Jacky should sleep in Wiart's house, but second thoughts had made this impossible.

They required to be free in their movements at night, and if Macquart were to sleep at Wiart's, it would be impossible for him to come and go without the chance of rousing Wiart and making him suspicious.

"Some in the boat and some in the tent," said Hull. "We have mosquito nets enough for both."

"Well, you can put up at my place, if you want to," replied Wiart.

They talked for awhile on various things, and then Wiart went off to supper.

The sun was setting now across the river, and just as his lower limb was cutting the tree-tops, Tillman went to the stores that lay under the boat sail and fetched out the pick-axe and the mattock. Then as the darkness took the river and the stars rushed out above, led by Macquart, they set off.

All along the river bank and for a mile above the village, the trees were chiefly sago palm, with a few nipah palms near the water's edge; they were set fairly wide apart and the going was easy; the light of the stars was sufficient for their guide, and they could see him as he went in front, a dusky shadow amidst the columns of the trees.

Half a mile or so above the village, the bank projected forward into the water, forming a promontory some twenty yards from base to apex; the river took a bend here so that the apex of the promontory formed the apex of the bend, and as they stood waiting for Macquart, who had stopped to speak, they could hear the water gurgling and sobbing round it, a mournful sound in the absolute stillness of the night. Stillness, that is to say, of the river and its bank, for the far forest stretching away in bosky billows under the now rising moon could be heard vibrating to the touch of night, just as a musical glass vibrates to a wet finger. Millions of insects and thousands of night birds were beginning their concert in those haunted groves, where

the moon burned green through the tropical foliage and the fathoms of liantasse and convolvulus cables sagged across paths untrodden by man.

Macquart, standing and looking around him, seemed at fault.

Tillman was the first to speak.

"Well," said he, "is this the spot?"

"It is the spot right enough," replied Macquart; "but the indications are gone."

"The which is which?" cried Hull. "What are you sayin'?"

"There was a camphor tree there," said Macquart, pointing to the apex of the promontory, "and another there," pointing to the base. "The trees are gone, damn it! Maybe they've been felled, maybe a hurricane knocked them down; anyhow, they are gone; but it doesn't matter. The stuff was buried between them and digging will find it."

The last words took a load off the minds of the adventurers.

"The cache was right in the middle between the two trees," said Macquart, "and we have only to dig in the middle of this bit of the bank to find it."

"Well, we'd better take a measurement, so's to get right in the middle," said Tillman, producing a ball of fishing line from his pocket. "Here, Houghton, lend a hand."

Houghton took one end of the line and took it to the apex of the promontory, whilst Tillman at the base held the other end.

"That would be about the position of the trees?" said he to Macquart.

"There or thereabouts," replied the other.

Tillman told Houghton to hold firm to his end of the line, then he walked up to him and came back with the doubled line, which gave them the half distance.

"This is the spot—or ought to be," said he. "Give us the pick."

He drove the pick into the soft earth again and again, breaking up the surface ground; then he began to dig with the mattock. The others stood by watching.

"What I can't make out," said Hull, "there ain't no tree trunks left. If them trees were cut down or broken by a storm, where's them trunks?"

Macquart laughed.

"A tree trunk in this part of the world doesn't last long," he said. "What between the climate and the insects, a year would see it gone."

"That's true," said Houghton.

Ten minutes later, Tillman stopped work and wiped his forehead; he had cleared away the earth from a space some yards square, leaving a hole about a foot deep. Hull, now, took up the spade and went on with the digging.

Not one word was spoken by any of the party in this the supreme moment of their lives. All their labours, all their seafaring, all their dreams, all their future centred and balanced on this spit of river bank, on this form digging, literally, for fortune under the light of the great calm, tropical moon.

Macquart, standing with his arms folded, seemed the genius of the scene.

Then Hull flung down the spade, exhausted, and Houghton took it up. After him Macquart.

Three hours of superhuman labour produced an enormous cavity wide and yawning to the moon, but not a sign of what they sought.

Macquart had stated that the cache was covered by only three feet of earth. The hole was five feet deep and more, yet it shewed nothing.

They sat down on the edge of it.

"Well," said Hull, to Macquart, "what are we to make of this? Where's your cache?"

Macquart said nothing for a moment, then he spoke:

"It was here; it *is* here. The trees being gone, I can't get the exact measurements between trunk and trunk; I've figured it out to the best of my ability. All I can say is that it is here on this spit of shore, and we must go on digging till we find it."

"I can't dig any more to-night," said Tillman. "I'm broke."

"So am I," said Houghton. "It's beastly, but the only thing for us to do is to knock off and start again to-morrow night. I'm going to dig the whole of this spit up before I stop." Then turning to Macquart: "Are you sure this *is* the place? Maybe you have been mistaken; there may be another spit like this *with* the trees growing as you said."

"I tell you, I am sure," replied the other. "The distance from the village is correct. It was here the stuff was buried and, unless it was taken away,

it is here still. And it cannot have been taken away. No one knew of it."

"Well," said Hull, rising up, "there's no manner of use talking, we've got to dig, and if the stuff don't turn up, b'gosh, I'll brain you, Mac! I feel that way."

"There's no use in talking like that," said Tillman gloomily. "Macquart is in the swim along with the rest of us, and if the stuff doesn't turn up, it hits him as well as us. Deuce take it, I feel as flat as ditch-water, but there's no use grumbling."

He picked up the mattock, and Hull taking the pick, they turned from the spit and walked back along the bank.

It was only now that the gold they were hunting for began to cry out to them with a full voice; only now that they began to perceive fully the awful difference between returning to Sydney empty-handed and returning with a fortune.

To each man the appeal was different.

To Houghton, the finding of the cache would mean success in a life that had been hitherto a failure, salvation from the mean things and the mean ways of existence, and all the difference between a man of power and a nobody.

To Tillman, success would bring the things he wanted, and he wanted a lot, from limitless clothes to a five-hundred-ton sailing yacht.

Hull wanted money; he had no plans, he just wanted money, craved for it as a sailor for cabbages or a child for sweets.

Macquart—ah! who can tell what Macquart wanted in this world? Many things, no doubt, even beyond what money could supply.

Back at the tent, Hull, Houghton and Tillman turned in, whilst Macquart and Jacky went off to the boat.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SCORPION AND THE CENTIPEDE

THEY were a rather gloomy party at breakfast next morning. Not one of them spoke of the events of the night before, and even Hull's enormous appetite seemed affected.

After the meal, Houghton led Tillman off for a stroll. The morning sun was shining through the trees, and the village folk were all off after rubber; they passed the village and just beyond, on the dense border of the forest, Houghton sat down on a fallen log, filled his pipe and lit it. He seemed to have something on his mind. Tillman sat down beside him and began to smoke also.

"Look here," said Houghton at last, "I've been thinking."

"Yes?"

"Macquart's not running straight."

"How do you mean?"

"He's bamboozling us."

"Over the cache?"

"Yes. The stuff's not buried there and never was. The *Terschelling* was never fetched up as far as this and never sunk here. That was her we saw in the lagoon."

"Which?"

"That old burnt ship we saw in the lagoon. Lant got all his men into the fo'c'sle and then set a light to her. I'm positive."

"Good God!" said Tillman. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying what I think. Let's reason it out. Lant stole the *Terschelling* and her cargo of gold. He knew the river, he knew the people, he was certain of a safe refuge here. But he did not want any one, of course, to know about the treasure, not even the people here. Why should he have brought the *Terschelling* up this distance? No, he put her into the lagoon, he made the crew cache the treasure there, then got them aboard and did for them. He had to keep one man to help in the business and to help him to come up here in a boat. That man was Macquart."

"Go on," said Tillman, whose pipe had gone out.

"He came up here with Macquart and married a native woman; that gave him a position and made him one of the tribe. Macquart saw him settling down, saw no chance of profiting and did for him. Then Lant's wife suspected, and Macquart had to shin out."

"Wait a moment," said Tillman. "Macquart told us that as having happened to a man named Smith. Well, haven't you seen that for the last long time Macquart has not been even trying to keep up the Smith fiction? He has all but acknowledged that he was Smith. Now, if he were a murderer, would he act like that?"

"To begin with," said Houghton, "there was

never any evidence of the crime, and it happened fifteen years ago. Macquart is absolutely safe. Again, he is not an ordinary man; he seems the most absolutely cynical and cold-blooded devil I have ever met. I have been watching him closely. He doesn't bother about hiding anything the law can't catch him for. He doesn't boast of his crimes, but he doesn't bother."

"Wait a moment," said Tillman. "Now see here. If that was the *Terschelling* we saw in the lagoon, and if the stuff is cached near there, why on earth did Macquart bring us up here? This place is a dangerous place for him. Lant's wife is still alive, and if she recognised him, she'd be sure to try and work him mischief."

"Did I not say that Macquart's object was to diddle us over the cache?" said Houghton. "He has brought us up here so that he may play us some beastly trick, of that I'm certain. It may be that he plans to steal off some night, slip down the river, load up the *Barracuda* and make off. He's very thick with Jacky; he understands Jacky's lingo, and I'm not so sure of Jacky's being straight; these black fellows most of them, from what I've heard, aren't to be depended on much."

"He might do that," said Tillman, "but I doubt if he would be able to get the *Barracuda* away with only Jacky to help."

"Oh, yes he would. Two men could do a lot with a boat of that size. Look at Slocum—went round the world by himself. Macquart would make for Macassar or somewhere close."

"There are two things that knock your idea on the head," said Tillman. "The first is Macquart and Jacky would never be able to transport all that gold from the cache to the *Barracuda* before we were on top of them—they could only get a five or six hours' start at the most; the second is, that without Screed's help, Macquart would never be able to dispose of it."

Houghton laughed. "I've been thinking the whole of this thing out," said he, "and I can answer that. Screed was a fool; we were all fools. Macquart, if he wanted to play us false, would not want to take all the stuff in the cache, a couple of thousand would do. With that he'd sail off to Macassar or somewhere else, settle, make a little position for himself and then, when he had a house and a banking account, he'd come back for the rest of the stuff—maybe a year from now—it's quite simple."

"Good God!" said Tillman suddenly.

"What?"

"Macquart and Jacky slept in the boat last night, and we in the tent."

"Yes," said Houghton, "that was the thing that started me off thinking last night just as I lay down. I thought to myself how easy it would be for those two to slip off. You will remember it was Macquart who suggested that he and Jacky should take the boat, as the tent was too small for the four of us."

Tillman said nothing for a moment. He seemed

reviewing the whole matter carefully. Then he spoke.

"We've got to consult at once with Hull," said he, "over this."

"For goodness' sake, no," replied Houghton. "If you put Hull on to this business, you will ruin everything."

"How?"

"Because Hull would be in this matter like a bull in a china shop. He hates Macquart, just as Macquart hates him. I honestly believe that Macquart is tricking us in this matter, not so much that he may collar all the stuff for himself, as that he may get even with Hull. However that may be, Hull, if he knew what we are thinking, would go on so that Macquart would be on his guard. We want to appear a particularly soft lot of fools, so that we may take him off his guard and get to know what his plans are.

"He knows where the stuff is cached and we want to get at that knowledge. He will never tell us of his own accord, for that would be to enrich Hull; besides, it would be contrary to the man's real nature. It would be *agony* to Macquart to share up and be honest over a huge sum of money like this. He is a fox-man, or, rather, a wolf-man. Well, we must turn ourselves into foxes or wolves if we want to share the prey."

One of the properties of Adventure is the power that it possesses for the development of character.

This expedition was already bringing forth the true mental properties of the adventurers with as-

tonishing results. Tillman, for instance, who had always seemed a butterfly under the false conditions of Sydney life, was exhibiting qualities of balance and energy that would have astonished his friends; and Houghton, brought to the test, was shewing a clearness of vision and a power of reasoning upon obvious facts that he had never exhibited fully before.

The power to reason clearly and justly on the obvious facts before us is a power denied to very many; it constitutes the soul of business and success in life. It was the secret of Napoleon's greatness, and it has been found wanting in many and many a philosopher.

"Well," said Tillman, "perhaps you are right. Hull's a blundering sort of chap, and there's no doubt he hates Macquart as much as Macquart hates him. We'd better lay low, we two, and we've got to watch this chap as a cat watches a mouse. I'll watch the boat to-night. There's a lot of bushes on the bank, I can hide there with a Winchester, and you can watch to-morrow night: we mustn't leave him a second alone. I'll go off now and see what he's doing."

He rose up and went off, leaving Houghton still seated on the fallen tree.

So deep was he in meditation that he did not hear a light step behind him. It was the girl of yesterday; she was coming along the path that led from the Dyak village to the waterside. As she drew up to the seated figure, she paused, stared, and sprang towards him.

The next moment the astonished Houghton found himself dragged by the arm off the log, and standing face to face with Chaya.

Without a word, the girl pointed to the log on which he had been seated, and Houghton saw an object that made his flesh crawl upon him.

It was the great scorpion of New Guinea, by far the most monstrous creation of the Tropics. It was almost the size of a grown man's hand, almost the colour of the dark wood on which it crawled, and as Houghton looked at it, he saw the tail with its terrible terminal nippers curl up and then flatten out again, and the whole body of the reptile move forward in its steady progress along the path it had chosen for itself.

Had he placed his hand upon it or pressed his leg against it, he would have died as surely as though a pistol had been fired at his head point-blank, for the bite of the great New Guinea scorpion not only kills, but kills in a most horrible way, and there is no antidote to the poison.

Houghton at once on the sight of the thing stooped down and picked up a piece of stick for the purpose of killing it, but again Chaya's hand fell upon his arm, this time restraining him. She was pointing at the tropical leaves that half covered one end of the log. Something was coming from among them. It was a centipede. A centipede eleven inches in length, ash grey changing to green, and orange where the thousand tiny legs moved in hideous vibration and with such rapidity

that they shewed only as a narrow band of orange-coloured mist.

Above and around were the tropical leaves; a bird like a puff of sapphire dust flew from the sunlight through the gloom of the branches, and over the battle that now ensued swung a sagging loop of liana, coloured like an old rope, except at one point, where from it blazed an orchid.

The centipede attacked. Making use of the inequalities of the bark, it covered the distance between itself and the enemy in three movements and with such cunning that the scorpion, who had perceived its antagonist from the first, seemed undecided and not to know from what point the attack was coming. There is nothing on earth more skilled in the art of taking cover than the centipede, more astute, more furtive.

Then in a flash, the battle was joined and the centipede was running over the back of the scorpion like a narrow ash-grey river. The claws of the scorpion sought for it and the pincered tail was flung back to seize it, but the river charging and shifting eluded all these attempts; it seemed as though the centipede possessed an eye to match every foot. In the fury of the fight the combatants tumbled off the log and, tangled together, the battle went on amidst the leaves on the ground with a fury that made Houghton almost feel ill.

Chaya, taking the piece of stick from Houghton, pushed the leaves aside and disclosed the end of the fight. The scorpion was tearing the centipede to pieces with its lobster claws, but its victory

brought its death. It had been mortally stung, the claws flung themselves up once or twice, the tail curved backwards for the last time, fell, and even as it fell the body of the thing was covered by rushing ants.

A great butterfly, sea-coloured and luminous, flitted across the log, and Houghton turned his eyes to Chaya. She was half laughing, the pupils of her dark eyes were dilated as if with the excitement of the battle they had just witnessed. She seemed the incarnation of the spirit of this land, where the flowers burgeoned in a night, where Love and Hate grew swift as the convolvulus that grows even as one watches it, where Beauty and Terror walk hand in hand with Destruction.

"Dead," said Chaya.

"You saved me," said Houghton.

He took both her hands in his. She had been in his thoughts ever since their eyes had met on the day before, and she knew it.

Houghton stood out from his companions, not only on account of his good looks. He possessed a refinement they lacked. He was the only man of his type who, perhaps, had ever trod that soil.

She laughed as he held her hands, laughed, looking right into his eyes, so that a fierce flame seemed to strike through him, filling him with the intoxication of light and fire, the intoxication that one may fancy to seize the moth before it dashes into the lamp.

Then he released her hands and the spell was

taken off him, but none the less his fate was sealed. She sat down on the log and he sat beside her.

"You come from far away?" said Chaya, in that English which the traders had taught her and which she spoke in a curious singing way, with a rising inflection that was the last charm of language.

"Yes, very far," he replied; "all the way from England."

"All the way from England," said she, repeating the words as though they did not interest her much, or as though they had little meaning for her.

"Yes—and I know who you are. You are Chaya."

"How know you *that*?"

"Wiart, the white man, told me."

"Ugh!" said Chaya.

Criticism could go no further in conciseness, and Houghton, looking sideways at his delicious companion, saw that her head was tilted slightly back, and it came into his mind for the first time that the old expression, "turning up one's nose," does not refer to the nose at all, but to the position of the head. And what a lovely head it was that taught him the fact, cut surely and sharply as the head upon a cameo, with night-black hair drawn backwards and fixed in a simple knot, without any adornment but its own beauty.

The arm close to him was bare, and the loosely worn robe exposed just a glimpse of her side and the fact that she wore the brass corsets used by the Dyak women of some tribes; the hand that still held the stick shewed no sign of hard work, small,

yet capable-looking, supple and subtle, with the finger-nails polished like agate, it fascinated Houghton. He longed to clasp it and hold it.

Chaya's colour was a new form of beauty in itself, derived from the fact that it was the blended colour-beauty of two races, the European and the Dyak; but her eyes shewed nothing of Europe in their depths, they were the eyes of the Saribas woman and filled with the mystery of the forests and the sea.

"You do not like Wiart?"

Chaya, instead of replying, sought amidst the leaves with the point of the stick, discovered what was left of the centipede and held it up on the stick end.

It looked like a string made of faded green paper.

She laughed as she held it up in answer to his question.

"It's about as ugly as he," said Houghton. "Chaya, where do you live? I know it's somewhere close here; but where?"

Chaya waved her arm all round, as if to indicate that she inhabited the whole forest, a delicate and humorous evasion of the question that seemed to hint: "We are getting on very well, but not quite so fast as all that."

Houghton smiled and bit his lip. He wanted nothing more but just to sit here beside her. Never in his life again would he feel just the same thrill and intoxication as he experienced now, in the first moments of his new existence, sitting by this half-mute, half-laughing companion.

She had dropped the remnants of the centipede and she was swinging the stick now, leaning forward as she sat with her elbows on her knees and the stick between her fingers.

She seemed musing on something.

As she sat like this, two butterflies, desperately in love with one another, passed flitting one above the other. She followed them with her eyes, and as she turned her head to watch them vanish in the gloom of the trees, her eyes met his and the call in them went straight to his soul. Maddened, scarcely knowing what he was doing, he stretched out his arms to seize her, but she evaded him like a ghost. Then she was gone.

He stood looking at the swaying leaves where she had vanished, swallowed up by the same gloom that had taken the butterflies, then his eyes fell to the ground where the stick she had held was lying, and the remnants of the scorpion and the centipede, whose battle to the death was to form the first chapter in one of the strangest love stories of the tropics.

CHAPTER XVII

SAJI

THE Dyak village, situated about a quarter of a mile from the Papuan village, constituted only a miserable remnant of what it had once been. There were scarcely forty members of the tribe that ages ago had come here from Borneo. Saribas Dyaks, sea plunderers and fishermen, who had found the river and fixed themselves here, well sheltered from pursuit of enemies, yet within touching distance of the sea.

Even in the days when John Lant had come here and settled down, marrying the mother of Chaya, the tribe had been in decadence.

When Lant died his wife had been chief woman of the tribe. She was still.

The mother of Chaya was a full-blooded Saribas woman, with all the instincts, all the pertinacity, all the ferocity, all the tenacity of her race.

She was not an old woman in years, but she was old in appearance, with a far-seeing and fateful look in her face that was daunting.

Her husband, whom she had loved, had been murdered. The murderer had done his work so skilfully that in a civilised community no suspicion would have been attached to him and no proc-

ess of law could have been put in operation against him.

But the mother of Chaya knew that the father of her child had been murdered and, though the murderer had escaped her and made good his escape, she knew that he would come back.

Even civilised people have "feelings" that amount to sure knowledge. Chaya's mother, with an inherited instinct for men and events preternaturally developed, had the sure feeling that the murderer would return.

On an everyday basis that event might have been predicted, for he had gone without the gold for which the crime had been committed. Chaya's mother did not know where the gold was buried, she only knew that it was somewhere in the vicinity of the river; the man would come back to the river and for fifteen years she had waited.

The fishing Dyaks of the tribe—there were no pirates now—had always been on the watch to give her news of strangers arriving. It was part of their business in life and had turned into a sort of religious observance.

The *Barracuda* had been observed even before she had engaged the reefs, and Saji, one of the youngest of the fishermen, had tracked her up to the lagoon. Hiding his canoe, he had observed everything to do with her berthing in the lagoon, and then, when Macquart and his companions had taken the boat and come up to the village, Saji had followed. It was his canoe that they had found

tied up to the landing stage when they came out of Wiart's house.

Saji had obeyed not only his orders and his own natural tracking instincts, but the desire to please the chief woman of the tribe.

Saji was in love with Chaya.

The tribe had fallen into that condition which scarcely allows for grades of rank; Saji as one of the best fishermen, though he had no special rank or standing, was as likely a suitor for Chaya as any of the others. He was eighteen years of age, straight as a dart, well-formed, and even to a European eye not bad-looking, but he was a pure-blooded Saribas, his dress was little more than an apron, and in the eyes of Chaya he did not exist as a man.

The white traders had shewn her the edge of civilisation and her instincts inherited from John Lant raised her above the level of the tribe. To complete the matter, Saji had let her perceive the nature of his feelings towards her. Besides being a good fisherman, he was a skilful metal worker, and he had only a month ago constructed a bangle of copper, beating it out from a copper rod with infinite pains and care; taking his courage in one hand and the bangle in the other, he had approached Chaya with the gift—and she had refused it.

"Give it to Maidan," she had said.

Maidan was one of the tribe girls and the least good-looking of them.

Though disdaining him as a lover, Chaya did not shew any dislike for him; she allowed him to ac-

company her in the woods and it was his half-naked form they had glimpsed the day before amidst the leaves. He had led her to shew her the strangers just as an hour before he had sought her mother to tell of the new arrivals.

Last night, when the party were digging on the spit of river bank, Saji led the old woman to inspect them. In the full moonlight, she had seen the face and form that her eyes had been aching to see for fifteen years.

Revenge was at last in her grasp and, as they returned to the Dyak village after watching the fruitless work of the diggers, she said to Saji:

"You shall have Chaya."

"Aïe," whined Saji as he trotted beside her—they were going full speed down the jungle path to the village—"but she cares naught for me."

"You shall have Chaya on the word of her mother, and the gift you will bring her will fetch her to your feet."

"What gift?" said Saji.

"That I will tell you soon. You have each stranger clear in your mind so that you would know each even in the dark?"

"Ay, I could tell each by his spoor or his smell."

"Then watch them all, but more especially the one I pointed out last—the others do not count."

They spoke in the Saribas dialect.

At the village they parted, Saji returning to keep a watch on the newcomers even as they slept.

That watch was never relaxed.

Fortunately for Houghton, he was not the man

especially pointed out to Saji as the man never to be lost sight of. Otherwise his meeting with Chaya might have been observed with disastrous consequences to him.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOUNDINGS

WHEN Houghton got back to the tent he found Tillman waiting for him. Hull was down by the boat attending to some matter or other.

"Macquart is in there in the house with Wiart," said Tillman. "They seem to have chummed up very much. There they are smoking cigarettes and drinking gin and water."

"I don't think Macquart is a man to drink much," said Houghton.

"No, he's not, but there he is with that soaker. I wonder what they're talking about. I went to the door and the smell of the place nearly knocked me down. Wiart asked me in, but I excused myself—said I had business to attend to."

"Oh, I don't think there's anything dangerous in it," replied the other. "Wiart has his business here to attend to and, between that and drink, his hands are pretty full."

As a matter of fact, Houghton's mind was so filled by Chaya that he did not want for the moment to think of anything else.

Had he frightened or offended her? He could not tell, but he cursed himself for his precipitancy and stupidity. He went down to the landing-stage

and sat watching Hull, who had bailed some water into the boat to prevent the seams opening and who was now engaged in overhauling some of the gear. But he did not see Hull. He was looking at the mental image of Chaya, listening to her voice.

One of the fascinating things about her was the manner in which she used gestures and pantomime to express her meaning. He was beginning to understand the great fact that, whereas Love in many cases is the child of long acquaintance, in others it is born instantaneously and is the child of First Sight. There are natures that fly together at first approach just as the elements of some chemical compounds fly together.

It seemed to him that he had been wanting Chaya all his life and that she had been waiting for him in these mysterious forests of which he had never dreamed, of whose existence he had been absolutely ignorant.

He was deeply disturbed not really because of the idea that he might have given her offence, for some instinct told him this was not so, but because of the general situation.

First, there was his own property. How, even if she loved him, could he ever take Chaya away from here? He had no trade, no resources, the expedition seemed to be turning out the wildest of wild-goose chases. How, even supposing that he could get away with her, could he ever take her to Sydney beggared as he was in the goods of the world? To remain here with her was an im-

possible thought. To live here, even with Chaya, would not be to live but to die to the world.

The place lay heavy on his soul, filled him with a vague terror; the languorous, heat-laden atmosphere, the very forms of the trees, the sluggish, oily-flowing river, the very superabundance of life and of life in its most terrible forms, all these had created around him that vague atmosphere of nightmare that the tropics can alone create.

Then, even supposing that the cache really existed, there was Macquart and his threatened treachery.

Macquart was a terrible man. He was beginning to recognise that fact even more fully now. A man who worked always for some hidden purpose and always underground. A wolf that was yet a mole. It is only given to human nature to incorporate in itself the properties of diverse animal natures, and sometimes this gift produces most strange monstrosities. He remembered that morning of his first meeting with Macquart in the *Domain* of Sydney; even at that first meeting something predatory in the make-up of his new acquaintance had struck him. Since then, and by slow degrees, the nature of the man had been half shewing itself, and the evidence against him accumulating. Houghton had been keen enough about the object of the expedition all through, but now he was doubly keen; it was not only the gold that was at stake, but Chaya. And he could do nothing but wait, nothing could be done to hurry matters.

Houghton's keen psychological sense had given

him some glimpse of the extraordinary mentality of the man upon whom everything depended. He guessed in Macquart some of those qualities that go to form the foundation of madness. Not that Macquart was mad in the least, never was there a man more coldly sane, but it seemed evident to Houghton that here was a man who would destroy everything, even his own chance of success, rather than allow success to a man he hated.

And Macquart hated Hull with an ungodly hatred. To Houghton, now, it seemed clearly demonstrated that Macquart's original plan was to bring the *Barracuda* into the lagoon where without doubt the treasure was cached, and not to come up here to the village at all. Macquart had meant to run straight, at least, till the gold was on board the *Barracuda*; after that, who knows what he might have done, but he would at least have used his companions for the purpose of shipping the treasure.

The advent of Hull changed all this, and the way in which Hull had managed to arm himself and his companions whilst disarming Macquart.

Finding his plans destroyed and his enemy on top of him, Macquart had evolved new plans which were now in progress.

What were these plans?

It was impossible as yet to predict. It was only possible to say that, to gain time for some purpose, Macquart would keep them digging every night at the place where there was nothing to be found.

The hopeful part of the situation was embraced by the fact that he knew nothing of their suspi-

cions, and the only plan of campaign for the present was to give him a free rein.

Hull presently relinquished his work on the boat and came up and sat down beside Houghton, complaining of the heat.

"Where's Mac?" said he.

"He's in there in the house smoking and talking to Wiart," replied Houghton.

The Captain lit a pipe.

"I don't know what's in me when I'm near that swab," said he. "I always want to lay him out. I do so. He raises my gizzard. Now, mind you, he played me a low-down, dirty trick that time fower years ago, but it's not that makes me want to flatten his head in with a shovel—it's himself. *My Gawd*, sometimes I feel I could let up on the whole of this show just for the sake of givin' that mud turtle a rap on the shell that'd finish him. Funny, ain't it?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Houghton. "I feel pretty much as you feel, sometimes, but he's the goose that lays the golden egg and it's better not to think of him."

"That's what I can't help," said the Captain. "I believe the chap's bamboozling us."

"Oh, nonsense," said Houghton, alarmed at the idea that Hull was sniffing at the truth and at the idea of the possible consequences. "Why should he let us down over the business? He has just as big a stake in it as we have, and he's no use without us."

"I don't know why he should," replied the other,

"but them's my feelings. We ought to have struck the stuff last night, we sure ought to if it's there. If we don't strike the stuff, well, all I've to say is it's Mac that'll be struck and struck hard. You'll see."

"Look here," said Houghton, "promise me one thing: promise me to say nothing to him *ever* that will make him think you suspect him without first consulting with me and Tillman. This is a serious matter, Captain, and supposing for a moment he is bamboozling us—which doesn't seem probable—we must act accordingly and all together to find out his plans."

"Oh, I won't say anything," replied the other, "or I'll have a talk with you two before I do. You tell me one thing. If the stuff was cached on that bit of bank, the ship it was took from, if they sank her, would be layin' close by. The river is only three fathom deep off the stage—I've took soundings—I don't believe it's much deeper up there, so they'd have sunk her in only eighteen foot of water. Why, she'd draw most that."

"She would," replied Houghton.

"Let's go and take soundings off the bank up there," said the Captain. "It'll be something to do." He went to the boat and fetched the sounding lead, and they left the stage and walked along the river bank up stream till they reached the spot.

The Captain looked at their excavation work of last night.

"It's lonesome enough to work by day up here without nobody knowing," he said, "only maybe that

blighter of a Wiart might see us goin' and suspect. I reckon perhaps Mac's right—unless he's foolin' us."

He made a cast with the lead from the bank edge of the base of the spit; it shewed two and half fathoms or thereabouts, then he went to the apex of the spit. The depth here was nothing, till one got well away from the bank.

"I'd have to bring the boat up to get correct soundin's," said Hull, "but what we've got will do. You see for yourself. There ain't anywhere just here a vessel could be moored to and sunk at her moorin's, and that was the way of it, accordin' to Mac."

"You're right," said Houghton. "The only thing one can suppose is that the river has altered in the course of fifteen years."

"I don't see what's to alter it," said the Captain, looking at the river. "No, sir; unless there's some deep pool near here we don't know nothing of, that ship was never moored to no bank of this river."

It seemed astounding to Houghton that Hull should not have thought of the lagoon and should not have connected the idea of the old burnt ship in the lagoon with the *Terschelling*, but a moment's reflection told him that Hull had not seen the burnt ship as they saw it, and also reminded him of the fact that the human intellect works in very narrow circuits. Hull's mind was held by Macquart's story to the village and this bit of bank; he was utterly lacking in imagination and the lagoon away down

the river never once occurred to him as the "deep pool" where the bones of the *Terschelling* might be lying.

They turned from the spit and made back through the trees towards the tent, and they had scarcely gone a hundred yards when something white moving amidst the tree boles drew Houghton's attention.

It was Chaya.

She had not been following them, evidently, for she was coming towards them, though not in the line of their path.

"There's the gal we saw yesterday," said Hull.

Houghton's heart sprang alive in him like a struggling bird.

It was only a couple of hours ago that she had evaded him. He would soon know now if she were angry or not.

She had a basket in her hand and was evidently going about some business or other, and she had seen him, he could tell that. But she did not alter her direction. She kept straight on, and passing them ten yards away she turned her head, caught Houghton's gaze full, and smiled.

He could only tell that she was not angry, that she was in fact quite friendly, but it seemed to him there was the faintest, faintest trace of mockery in that smile. The mockery of a child that has just escaped its would-be captor.

Then she was gone.

"She give you the glad eye," said Hull. "She did shore—— Funny things them females are, she hadn't no eyes for me. I never did hold with

wimmen folk and never took up with them much, excep' maybe now and then when I've had more money in my pocket than wits in my head."

"You were never married, Cap'—were you?" asked Houghton, asking the question more as something to say to hide his jubilation than for any other reason.

"Yes, I were," replied Hull. "Took in by a female that used to live in James Street, 'Frisco, down by the Chiney docks. Westhouse her name was and she took in washin'. Ran a la'ndry. She weren't more than twenty-five year old and she weighed near two hundred. I sighted her first when she was punchin' a Chow in the eye. He was one of the la'ndry hands and he'd cheeked her and she let out and laid him flat. She was in a ragin' tearin' paddy and when I complimented her on her fist work she let out and nearly downed me, too. Never you go nigh an angry woman even to praise her, a woman in that state isn't accountable, she wants somethin' to hit and she'll hit anythin' in sight. I didn't care. I on'y laffed and then she began to laff too, and we went and had a drink, and that day week we were spliced, and she were makin' all of a hundred dollars a week clear profit.

"I reckoned to give up the sea and live on the profits, but she didn't. Oh, Lord, no! she reckoned to make a la'ndry hand of me and spend my wages on booze. She drank dreadful, but the drink didn't bust out in her till after the weddin'. She kep' on celebratin' the occasion, so to speak, till the la'ndry began to turn itself from a la'ndry to a stack of

empty bottles. Then I let go all holts and took my hook, and when I came back to 'Frisco a year after, she was married to a Chink and the la'ndry was in full blast again, with the Chink doing the drinkin' and she doin' the workin'. It's my 'sperience when folks get married it's either the man or the woman drinks, and the one that takes to drink the first and keeps at it consistent has the best time of it."

This unlovely story was only half heard by Houghton, whose thoughts were engaged on a more pleasant subject.

When they got back to the tent they found Tillman talking to Macquart.

Tillman was seated on the ground with his back to a tree, and Macquart was seated near him. The discussion, whatever it was, between the two, was being conducted with vigour to judge by the gestures of Macquart.

"See here, you fellows!" cried Tillman as they approached. "Here's something new."

CHAPTER XIX

THE NEW MOVE

WELL," said Hull, taking his seat on the ground near Tillman, "what's up now?"

"Everything," said Tillman. "Ask Macquart."

"It's not as bad as that," said Macquart; "in fact, as far as I can see, things are looking better than they did when we knocked off work last night, but I'm beginning to have more than a suspicion that we have been done."

Houghton saw Hull's big hand clench itself as it lay beside him on the ground. Fearing that the Captain might take up the question of Macquart, he moved close to him and managed to nudge him unseen by the others.

"How do you mean?" he said. "Who has done us?"

"The natives, I believe, and be —— to them," said Macquart. "It's this way. When we struck nothing last night, when, in fact, I saw that the marking trees were gone, I began to suspect. I began to say to myself, can it be possible that the stuff has been removed? I thrashed the thing out in my own mind. I said to myself, fifteen years is a long while, can white men have been here and taken the stuff off? Then I saw at once, arguing from com-

mon sense, that—outside miracles—the thing could not be. No white man in the world had track of the position of the thing but me.”

“Steady on,” said Hull, speaking despite the warning nudges of Houghton, “wasn’t you goin’ round the world huntin’ for a chap to put up money for this expedition? Why, God bless my soul, you told me about the thing fower years ago in ’Frisco. Well, if you told it to me, you told it to loads besides. How do you know that one of them chaps hasn’t been to the money box?”

The enmity of Macquart towards the questioner shot out in his glance.

“How do I know? I know because I wasn’t such a complicated fool as to give any man a hint that would bring him within two hundred miles of the thing. Have you any more questions to ask? Well, then. I said to myself last night, no white man has been here, but how about natives? The Papuans are out of court, they are too stupid. How about the Dyaks? They’re clever, they may have ferreted out the stuff, and if they did they’d know it belonged to John Lant and they’d maybe move it to some other place more safely hid than the river bank. They’re full up of superstitions, and if any bad luck had been happening to them or if they’d been unlucky at fishing or if one of their wise women had been dreaming things, they might have taken it as an indication, if they knew the stuff was there, to move it. Anyhow, those were my thoughts. Then to-day, when I was yarning with Wiart, I managed to hit on some news. Two years ago there

was a big disturbance here and the Dyaks stopped fishing for a week. They were desperately busy about something, carting mat baskets through the woods. Wiart was very busy just then with the rubber and he didn't notice things much till towards the end of the pow-wow, when one day he was out prospecting in the forest and he came on the thing the Dyaks had been carting their baskets to. He followed one of the basket carriers to it, in fact. It was a sort of temple hut and he didn't go further, for he didn't want to be seen prying into their affairs. He never thought that the stuff those chaps were carting might be gold, he thought it was earth from the river-side and they had some religious reason for bringing it. He thinks so still. I haven't said anything to make him think different. Well, I believe that's where the stuff is. I believe they cut the marking trees down, though maybe the trees fell of their own accord. Anyhow, that's the position, and Wiart knows where that hut place is in the forest; anyhow, he said he could go there quite easy."

"Well," said Hull, "if he could, we'd better yank him out and make him lead us there."

"I believe there's something in this," said Houghton, with an air of conviction, "but we must go cautiously."

"There mayn't be anything in it at all," said Macquart; "it may be a wrong scent entirely, but it's worth enquiring into."

"If it's true, our difficulty will be this," said Tillman. "If the Dyaks have hid the stuff, you may

be sure they'll not let us take it off without a word or two."

"And how about our Winchesters?" cut in Houghton. "And our six-shooters? Seems to me the argument on our side will be the strongest."

"If it comes to that," said Macquart, "I'll make the Dyaks do the hefting, I'll make them carry that stuff right down to the *Barracuda* and not bother about the boat. And there's another point, you three are armed, I've got nothing but my naked hands; if we are to carry this thing through we must all be armed. I've got to have a six-shooter."

"That's perfectly right," said Houghton, "and you'll have mine the moment we touch the stuff."

Macquart said nothing but began to fill a pipe, then he lit it. He seemed satisfied with Houghton's promise; at least, his mind seemed to have travelled to some other subject.

"We'd better go on digging to-night," he said, "on the chance that some shock of earthquake may have deepened the stuff, though I don't think that's very probable. Anyhow, we'd better make plumb sure the cache is gone. I believe I'm right in supposing it is, but we can never be quite sure in this world. Then to-morrow I can fix it up with Wiart to take us to that place."

"Why not call the chap out now and let's talk it over?" said Hull.

"If you like," said Macquart, "only I'd advise not. He suspects nothing of what we're after and, if you leave it to me, he'll go on not suspecting till we're dabbling our hands in the yellow boys."

"You're right," said Houghton. "Hull, we'd better leave this thing to Macquart, he's cleverer than the whole of us."

"Oh, I don't pretend to be clever," said the other. "I struck on the idea by chance and it was the merest chance that I sounded Wiart on the matter. That's all there is to it."

"Well, let's say nothing more till we've had another try to-night," replied Houghton. "If we draw a blank, then to-morrow we can make arrangements with Wiart."

Half an hour later Tillman, taking Houghton for a stroll down to the landing-stage, broke silence.

"Do you think Macquart is in earnest?" he asked.

"Not a bit," replied Houghton; "he's cooking some dog's trick to play on us. I believe he has roped that scamp of a Wiart into his scheme, as a cat's-paw, of course. He intends to take us into the woods and do for us. Notice the way he made the bid for arms."

"Yes, and you promised him your revolver."

"When we touched the stuff. The stuff is not in the woods."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, why should we go with him? I'm not a funk, but when we know or suspect he's going to do for us, why not tackle him at once?"

"If he was an ordinary scoundrel, I'd put my revolver to his head and threaten to shoot him if he didn't show us where the cache was," replied Houghton. "But he's not. The threat wouldn't

have any effect on him simply because he'd rather be shot, I believe, than show that stuff to Hull. There's the faint chance that this yarn *may* be true and that his plan is to get us to help move the stuff before doing us in, and there's the chance that he may lead us into some trap. Now, if I could once convict him of that and escape the trap, *then* I'd make him show us the place we want even by torturing him, then it would be a question of hot blood. But we've convicted him of nothing and you can't torture a man in cold blood—I can't. So we'll just have to lay low, not care a dump for danger and be ready to pounce."

"I'll be ready to do the pouncing," said Tillman, "if I get the chance."

After supper that night and just before moonrise, they stole off again up stream to the spit.

Four hours' digging showed no result beyond a hole in which, to use Hull's expression, they could have buried a church. Then, depressed but not dispirited, they returned to the tent.

Hull and Houghton retired to rest, but Tillman, according to his arrangement with Houghton, slipped off armed with a Winchester to keep watch on the boat.

CHAPTER XX

A PICTURE IN THE FOREST

IT was noon next day when Macquart, who had been in the house with Wiart having a long talk, drew the others together for a consultation.

He led them among the trees to a spot where a clearing had been made by Nature, a regular room of the woods roofed with blue sky and walled with the liquid shadow of foliage. Macquart took his seat on the trunk of a camphor tree long fallen, Tillman sat down beside him, whilst Hull and Houghton remained standing.

"Well, I've fixed it," said Macquart. "He's open to lead us to the place, not to-day because he has to look after the rubber chaps, it's pay-day, but to-morrow."

"Will he be sober, think you?" asked Hull.

"He's off the drink. When we landed he was just at the end of a burst. He'll be right enough now for a couple of months and then he'll have another. He's that sort."

"Well," said Hull, "I guess you know more of the fellow's clock-works than I do. I can't stomach the blighter nohow. Them whiskers of his sticks in my gizzard. I never could abide whiskers on a man—them pork-chop style. If a man's a man, let

him grow a full face of hair or stick to a moustache. Them sort of whiskers is unholy, and I don't mind a drinkin' man that takes his drink proper, but that chap don't. He's a last-night's drunk goin' about in trousers. By Jiminy, boys, if we don't hit the cache, we'll export him as an objec' lesson. Them temp'rance guys would give a hundred thousand dollars for him to take round the States, they would so."

"Well, he's our last chance," said Macquart, "and I pin my faith to him, I do so. You mayn't like him, but don't say anything to rile him; he's the key to this proposition."

"We won't do anything to rile him," said Tillman. "Where's Houghton going?"

Houghton had walked off and was away among the trees.

"It's that gal," said the Captain; "she was peekin' at us from the trees and he's gone after her. She's after him, too, or my name's not Hull. We only wanted a cage of turtle doves to add to our top hamper and, b'gosh, I believe we've got one."

Houghton had glimpsed her, a white glint among the trees. She had been looking at them. He knew quite well that, if he had not been of the party, she would not have been there. Forgetting the others and heedless of everything, he made towards her. Seeing him coming, she evaded him without taking flight, allowing herself to be glimpsed every now and then, and every now and then vanishing completely from sight.

This was the edge of the great and mysterious

forest that throws its cloak far and wide over New Guinea. The trees just here were not very closely set, but swinging lianas tufted with growths and huge shrubs with foot-broad leaves gave ample cover for any one pursued. Not wishing to call out, half laughing, half vexed, hit in the face by leaves and clutched at now and then by thorns, he continued the pursuit till now where the trees were denser and the gloom more profound he stood lost and without sight of her, surrounded on all sides by a barrier that on all sides was the same.

Parrots were crying in the tree-tops and the push of the wind against the foliage came as a deep sigh, the voice of leagues of trees sleeping and half disturbed in their sleep.

Then came a scuttering in the branches up above, and a nut hit him on the shoulder and as he glanced up another nut caught him a sharp blow on the cheek. He was being pelted by little monkeys, swarms of little monkeys, skipping from branch to branch, hanging by their tails or by one hand. He was wiping his cheek when a laugh sounded almost at his elbow and, turning, he saw Chaya. She was pushing back the leaves that hid her to peep at him and before she could escape he caught her.

He held her hands, and as he drew her towards him he felt as though he were drawing towards him the very soul of the mysterious forest, the very spirit of this tropical land, unknown and strange. She looked straight and deep into his eyes, and for a moment the prisoner and the captor changed places; then, breaking the spell, he released her

hands to seize her to him, and he seized only air. She had eluded him again and he found himself face to face with nothing but swaying leaves. She had vanished as completely and suddenly as though the forest had snatched her from him. The forest that was her accomplice and of which she was the true child.

He pushed the still swaying leaves aside, thought that he perceived a glimpse of her and pursued it to find—nothing. Then, after half an hour of fruitless wandering, he broke into an open glade and found himself close to the Papuan village. There was a great commotion in the village, one of the rubber gatherers had been brought in. He was lying on the ground, turning from side to side, crying out and, to all appearances, delirious.

As Houghton approached, the unfortunate man ceased his outcries, raised himself with a supreme effort nearly to his feet and then fell back. He was dead. The natives, seeing the white man, pointed to the corpse and seemed trying to explain matters. Then one of them shook something from a mat basket, pointed to it and to the corpse. The thing he had shaken from the basket was a scorpion, rather smaller than the one from which Chaya had saved Houghton. It had bitten the unfortunate man only half an hour ago and here lay the result.

Houghton shivered at the thought of what he had escaped. It was like an object lesson of what this country held for the unwary, a picture of its dangers for all who tread the paths of life or love.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GREAT THORN BUSH

S AJI knew nothing of the meetings between Houghton and Chaya. Had he done so, Houghton's story would have come to a very abrupt end. Saji was a being who moved entirely in blinkers with a more than vivid view of his immediate objective, but with great darkness on either side of him. So we might fancy the tiger to move through the jungle.

Having received his commission to watch the strangers and especially Macquart, he fulfilled it to the letter. The reward of his obedience would be Chaya; that was sufficient to blind him to everything else but his work.

Hull and his companions had found themselves unobserved and alone. The interest of the Papuans in them seemed to have died out and the Dyaks showed no evidence of their existence. In reality, the newcomers made scarcely a movement that was not noted. Saji, unseen, was always with them. He had followed them to the second digging at the spit, and he had lurked behind Wiart's house listening to the conversation between Wiart and Macquart through a hole in the boarding of the wall.

He knew very little English, but enough to make out that a new move was in progress, and that same night, coming back with his report through the forest glowing green to the moon, he met the mother of Chaya and delivered his report.

"They have done no digging to-night," said Saji. "They are all now asleep, but they start to-morrow with the rubber man."

"Where?"

"I do not know where, or for what. The rubber man and he whom you told me to watch have been with their heads together for a long time talking in one another's ears. They mean no good to the others."

"How?"

"I do not know, but I smell death in all their talk. I see that five will go away into the forest and only two return—the rubber man and the other."

The old woman said nothing for a moment. She seemed listening to the wind in the trees and the night sounds of the forest.

In that vague green light, she seemed unutterably sinister and old, and Saji, his naked body glowing in the vague light, seemed the incarnation of the spirit of the Punan stabbing spear he carried.

It was like a conference between Age and Destruction.

Then she said:

"You must follow them, even if they lead you to the Black Waters, and you must deal with the one you know at the very moment when you find

him alone. Should you fail to get him alone, you must deal with him in the presence of the others, even though you die. Do you promise?"

"I swear."

Chaya came out from amidst the trees. She had been with the old woman and had left her before the meeting with Saji; then, looking back, she had seen the meeting and had returned to listen. Saji had been watching her all the time as she listened and the fervour of his words seemed derived from her presence. The old woman did not seem to notice her, nor to care whether she was listening or not.

"At what time do they leave?" she asked.

"I do not know," said Saji. "But leave when they may, I will be with them, unseen."

Without a single word more the old woman turned and made for the village.

Saji and Chaya found themselves alone. These two, despite the fact that Chaya was indifferent to him, as though he were a dog, had long been companions in the forest. It was Saji who had taught her to use a blow-pipe so that she could kill a monkey or a bird at ten yards' distance; he had taught her woodcraft from the time when they had been children together and she had once gone in the fishing prahu with him and had seen the sea breaking on the reefs, and the trepang gatherers at their work, and the great gulls fishing, the sailor brothers of the forest birds and as different from them as the foliage is from the waves.

She had gone with him on his hunting expeditions in the forest. Saji was a great hunter of small game.

He would have been equally great after big game had there been any to hunt, but here in these forests you might travel days without meeting anything more dangerous than the little monkeys and the climbing kangaroos. Occasionally, as though bursting in upon the last haunts of primitive man, the native hunters would open some glade to discover the great monkey of Papua, more close to man than the gorilla, almost as big and infinitely more rare. But Saji had never encountered this brute, though once in a green glade he had seen it cross from tree edge to tree edge followed by a figure equally monstrous—its mate.

"You are going hunting then?" said Chaya, in the sing-song voice to which the Saribas' dialect inclines.

"To-morrow," said Saji, without raising his eyes, which he had lowered at her approach.

"In the forest?"

"In the forest."

"You have told me of the big man ape, but to-morrow you follow the little man ape, the one with the beard."

"There are two bearded man-apes in that party," said Saji, falling into her vein.

"But your game is the least," said Chaya. "I know. He was the slayer of the white man who was my father. He must surely die."

"It has been said."

"But the others," went on Chaya, "must not die."

"Who knows?" replied Saji. "The forest is very full of death, he will lead them to it. His pur-

pose is set more straight than a spear shaft, than the flight of an arrow."

"I will go with you and see this thing," said Chaya. "It will be better to see than the killing of little monkeys with the blow-pipe or the trapping of fish in the nets. I will be with you at day-break and I will bring my spear."

Saji for the first time looked up at her. His eyes burned in the gloaming, then he glanced swiftly down.

"As you will," he said.

Meanwhile the man in the tent and the man in the boat by the landing-stage and the man in the frame house slept. The whole complicated and intricate conspiracy, now vaguely shadowed forth, lay in balance, watched only by Saji hiding near the tent and Houghton who, to-night, had taken Tillman's place and was hiding near the boat.

Macquart, whose able mind was engaged on whatever plans he had made against his fellow-adventurers, had not the slightest fear of the past or suspicion that a hand was stretching out to feel for him.

Macquart was in the position of a man who leaves a village, spends years of adventurous life in distant countries, and returns fancying himself forgotten, forgetting the fact that memory lives long in quiet places and amongst small communities.

With the exception of one or two of the fishing Dyaks, he had not seen a member of the tribe, and he slept now the sleep of the unjust, which is often

more peaceful and profound than the sleep of the just.

Saji, hiding near the tent, had not the slightest notion that Chaya, who was to accompany him on the morrow, had any interest in the expedition, except the interest of the killing there might be to see. Saji judged Chaya by himself, just as Macquart judged the memory of the tiny Dyak village by the memory of the great civilised cities.

Hull, unconscious of everything, and Tillman, suspicious but tired, slept so that the sound of their snoring might have been heard by the two watchers, Saji by the tent and Houghton by the river.

Then as the colour of the sky, the voice of the forest changed with the breaking dawn, and the river that had held the stars in reflection shewed to the increasing light ghost spirals of mist that clung to the mangroves with wreathy fingers.

Then a golden glow came over the forest, and the sky above the green of the trees deepened in distance and where the stars were but a moment ago there was now the blueness unutterable of the tropic dawn.

Hull came out of the tent and stretched himself. Houghton had released himself half an hour ago from his duties as sentry and was engaged in shaving himself before a mirror fastened to the tent canvas, and now Jacky and Macquart shewed themselves coming up from the river-side.

Lastly Tillman made his appearance.

"We'd better get breakfast and then set to work to pack the provisions," said Hull.

"We won't want to take too much," put in Macquart. "The expedition won't last long and we can always shoot as much as we want for food."

"Maybe," replied the other, "but I ain't goin' to trust to no roast monkeys for my grub. Here comes the sleepin' beauty."

It was Wiart who had appeared on the verandah of his house.

Wiart had improved very much in appearance since they first met him. He had been then at the end of one of his periodical drinking bouts and he would be all right now till the next attack. His face looked more healthy and more human, despite the whiskers that gave such great offence to Hull, and he had a rifle under his arm and a bandolier of cartridges slung across him.

He came towards the party by the tent, for he was to breakfast with them.

Hull stared at the coming figure with a frown on his face.

"Hi," said he, "what's that? What are you doin' with that gun and them ca'tridges?"

"Doing," said Wiart. "Nothing, carrying them."

"Well, then," said Hull, "you'll just oblige me by carryin' them back and leavin' them in the house; this is a picnic, it ain't no huntin' party."

"But what are you talking about?" cried Wiart. "I always go armed in the woods."

"Not with me," said Hull. "I'm meanin' no offence, but I don't go walkin' with armed strangers in no woods. I'm as sure as certain you're an amiable man, but you're a stranger to me, as the lady

on the 'Frisco tram said to the gentleman whose foot was on hers. Now do you take me or do you don't—my ultimatum is no armaments."

"Then you can go without me," said Wiart, grounding the butt of the rifle and half turning away.

"One moment, son," said Hull. "I can *not*. You've contracted to lead this party and it's up to you to finish the contrac'."

Whether he received some sign from Macquart, it is impossible to say, but the Rubber Man gave in suddenly and unconditionally on the point of arms, put the rifle and cartridges back in the house and sat down to breakfast.

"I don't blame you for being cautious," said he, "though this seems caution run mad, if you'll excuse me for saying so, 'specially as the whole lot of you are armed. However, let it stand at that. I don't mind."

He understated the case. This was much more than caution run mad; it was perhaps the most deadly insult that one white man could put on another in that place. Hull did not care in the least. If Wiart had attempted to back out of leading them he would, as he said, have taken him along by a halter. Instinct had warned him against Wiart. He knew absolutely nothing of the suspicions that filled the more cultivated and sensitive minds of his companions, but he did know that not on any account would he trust himself in lonely places with the Rubber Man if the latter were armed. There is no doubt that in his subconscious mind Hull had

worked out the sinister possibilities of any collaboration between Macquart and Wiart, but he was unconscious of the fact.

When breakfast was over, they began to pack up the provisions, Hull supervising.

"We don't want no tent," said he. "There ain't no 'skeeters in the forest to speak of, and we can light a smoke fire to keep 'em off if there are. Jacky can carry the pick and shovel. Now then, if you're ready, histe your bundles."

They streamed off, Wiart and Macquart leading, Jacky and Hull coming next, and Tillman and Houghton following. Wiart had a pocket compass, and Hull had another, though, as Wiart said, his knowledge of the road was so intimate that compasses were unnecessary.

They went down the glade past the Papuan village and struck into the trees where the glade ended.

It was like passing into a house; the damar, cutch and camphor trees around them flung their branches to make the roof, a roof supported by a thousand pillars.

Just as the outline of the Tartar tents can still be seen in the outline of the roofs of the Chinese pagodas, so in the pillars of the cathedral we can see a vague sketch of the Forest, that first home of man, and in the gloom of our cathedrals some tincture of the gloom of the great cathedral that God created for the first worshippers.

The forests of the north have a solemnity all their own, and the forests of the tropics a mystery

incommunicable to those who have not experienced it.

Here in the twilight that seems the twilight of the birth of things, vegetable life appears still clinging to its first and most extravagant forms. It moves. Like that convolvulus in the Botanical Gardens of Caracas that grows at the rate of an inch an hour, here, in the forests of New Guinea, the lianas lengthen themselves almost perceptibly, vines fight the trees and kill them, trees fall and crush the vines. The orchids are everywhere. They seem the furious attempt of the vegetable world to enter the kingdom of the birds and butterflies and insects. That bird clinging to that rope of liantasse is a flower, that butterfly is an illusion, that insect an orchid.

That bursting crash is a tree that has been falling for a year. The forest kills itself and re-creates itself eternally; it is a community where the vegetable is king and where the vegetable wars with the animal and the insect, sets traps for flies and thorn entanglements for animals and mazes to bewilder and destroy men.

Houghton was alive to these impressions, Tillman less so.

"I've fixed up with Hull," said he, "to keep those two chaps always in front of us; they can't do any harm then."

"I'm not afraid of them and their tricks, unless we find the cache," said Houghton. "You see, while we are like this we can always guard against them, but should by any chance this lead of Macquart's

be a real one and we touch the stuff, then in the excitement of the business, when we aren't thinking, they may get their blow in."

"You needn't worry about that," said Tillman. "This lead is a spoof. I'm dead sure of that. Mac has some black joke up his sleeve. D'you know, I've got to that condition now that the gold is less to me than the chance of doing Macquart in if we catch him playing tricks; that chap has got on my spine. God! how I'm beginning to hate him!"

"I'm feeling like that," replied the other. "It's the strangest thing. At first I liked him, he seemed better than a fairy tale, and slowly I've got to feel like you. Yet he has never given me offence. Hull hated him all along, you see he knew him better, and, besides, he's a chap that moves by instinct. Did you notice the down he's taken on Wiart?"

"You mean on his whiskers. Hull's a rum chap, and somehow he's hit the thing about Wiart that seems the bull's-eye. A chap must be a beast to grow a pair of things like that on his face—lost to all sense of decency."

Houghton laughed and they said no more.

The work was becoming heavy. They were crossing a boggy patch where tall nipah palms grew—the nipah palm loves the water—and their feet sank ankle deep at every step.

Beyond lay clear ground except for barrier lianas sagging so low that sometimes they could be stepped over.

Where the trees grew denser beyond this patch,

the monkeys began to give them their attention. Swarms and swarms of little monkeys scurrying through the leaves above like a breeze, pursued them and circled them, pelting them with nuts and bits of stick and other ammunition, till Tillman, losing patience, raised his Winchester, sighted one, and brought it down.

Then the brave bombardiers ceased their work, and the party pursued their way till at noon Hull called a halt in a clearing and they set to on the provisions.

In cutting Hull out of their councils, Houghton and Tillman had made a mistake. They had considered him too volcanic to trust with their suspicions, they had forgotten that he had a mind of his own and that the working of that mind unchecked by them might be prejudicial to their plans.

Hull, as he ate now, was thinking. The working of the jaws in mastication stimulates some brains, just as the contemplation of the ideal stimulates others. Hull, as he chewed his bully beef, began to think that he had never made full enquiries of Macquart as to the extent of Wiart's knowledge of their real business or his compensation if they were successful.

"Look here," said he to Wiart, "you know, I s'pose, that you're not takin' us on this traverse for the sake of our health."

Wiart glanced at Macquart, who at once chipped in:

"Oh, I've told Wiart we're not hunting for that place the niggers carted the baskets to for nothing.

He's quite ready to lend us his assistance without prodding too deep into our affairs."

"All the same," said Hull, "I'm a man that takes nothing from no man for nothing and, if we strike what we're lookin' for, I'm not goin' to deny his dues to him who brought us to it."

"There's no use in talking of that yet," said Houghton hurriedly.

"Oh, yes, there is," said Hull. "It's better to settle jobs like these right off at the start, then there'll be no quarrelling at the finish, and if we hit what we're lookin' for, I'm up to give Mr. Wiart two hundred pound for his work in directin' us. A man can't say fairer than that."

Tillman, who was looking at Wiart, thought that he saw a momentary gleam of mockery in his eye.

"Oh, that's all right," said he. "I'm not bothering about rewards. I can see plain enough what you gentlemen are after, and I'll not deny that I guessed it from Mr. Macquart's questions and what he let fall. Well, if it's treasure, then, and you strike it rich I'm not indisposed to take what you offer. I came on this expedition for the fun of the thing and to get away from that confounded rubber plantation for a day or two; that's what riled me when you objected to my carrying a rifle. That's maybe why you objected. You thought in your mind, this man may make trouble——"

"Wait a bit," cut in Hull, "I only put in my word against arms because I didn't know you and because you were a bit thick with Mac here. You'll

observe Mac doesn't carry a gun. Mac and me has differences at times, don't we, Mac? And I objects to any chanst of us quarrellin'. Now if Mac's friend had a gun, Mac might borrow it, mightn't you, Mac?"

Houghton jumped to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "There's no use in sitting here talking. Let's be doing."

He began to pack up the things, and the others, rising to their feet, helped him. Then they got under way in the same order of procession.

At four o'clock they arrived at a part of the forest which goes by the native name of the Great Thorn Bush.

CHAPTER XXII

MACQUART'S THIRD TRICK

IT is the chief wonder of this part of the forests of New Guinea. Square miles upon square miles of Wait-a-Bit thorn, six feet in height, cut into a thousand intersecting roads and presenting a maze all the more intricate from the fact that the roads are sparsely occupied by trees.

Where the thorn is there grows nothing but thorn, forming a terrible wall, impenetrable as a barbed-wire entanglement.

"There's a bad bit of stuff in front of us," said Wiart, "but we can get through before sundown; the way through winds a bit, but I know the road and if I should miss it the compass will put us right."

"Heave ahead," said Hull.

Wiart, Macquart, and Jacky led the way, the others following. Hull had closed up with his two companions and, as they went along, Houghton proceeded to take him to task for his indiscretions.

"It was no good of you opening that question with Wiart," said he.

"What question?" asked Hull.

"Good Lord! About the payment we'd give him.

Two hundred pounds—what's two hundred pounds to the amount we're expecting to find?"

"And how's he to know what we're expectin'?" asked the other. "My idea was, if we nosed the stuff, to get rid of Don Whiskerandos before we carted it off, pay him a lump sum and get him drunk. He don't know what we're expectin'."

"How do you know he doesn't?"

"Who'd tell him?"

"How do you know Macquart hasn't told him?"

"He's not such a durned fool as that," said the Captain. "Where'd be the sense of lettin' another chap into the know?"

"Well, it's this way. Tillman and I have been suspecting that Macquart is up to some trick to do us three out and he's pulled Wiart in. Of course it's only suspicion, but if there is any understanding between them, and if Wiart does know what we expect to find, the offer of two hundred will only strengthen his determination to help Macquart. He'll say to himself that, with such a measly offer, it's worth risking everything to go against us. I think we'd better let Wiart into the whole thing and make him a partner and see if we can get him to peach on Macquart, if Macquart has been doing any plotting. I could take him aside when we camp to-night and sound him if you fellows agree."

"Let him in!" said Hull. "You'd better let the whole of New Guinea in while you're about it, *and* put up placards when we get back to Sydney statin' the job we've been after and the amount."

"I think Houghton is right," said Tillman. "It's

better to lose a bit than lose all. Macquart is a rat and he hates you, Hull, and would be only too glad to serve you some dirty trick."

"Listen," said Houghton.

They were pursuing their way along a thorn alley in sight of Macquart and the others who were leading the way, and now, seeming to come from far away behind them, they heard a voice as though some one were hailing them.

A girl's voice evidently. Then it ceased.

They looked back, but they could see nothing beyond the distance of twenty yards or so. Though the trees were so sparsely placed that walking between them was easy, in the aggregate they made an obstruction to the eye, to say nothing of the fact that the path was irregular in its course.

"Come on," said Hull, "or we'll lose sight of them chaps in front. It's a bird, maybe, anyhow it's no consarn of ours."

They resumed the way and their argument, till at last Hull gave in.

"Well, if you chaps are set on it," said he, "I'm not goin' to stand against you, and Mac will have to pay the blighter out of his share. He's fooled the bizness up to this an' he'll have to pay for his foolin'."

They had reached a part of the great thorn bush now that was simply a maze of alleys. This great maze extends over many square miles, how many no man can say, for no man has ever mapped it or measured it. The whole of this district is hated by the natives and feared as the abode of evil spirits.

Small wonder, for nothing can be more sinister than this intricacy of paths hedged by the mournful thorn.

Macquart and Wiart and Jacky, going steadily ahead, disappeared round an angle of the way and when the others reached the angle they found bending paths leading from it in every direction, but of Macquart and Wiart and Jacky not a sign.

It was as though the earth had swallowed them.

"Hullo!" cried Hull. "What's gone with them blighters?"

"They've given us the slip," said Tillman. His face had suddenly turned pale and his lips so dry that he had to moisten them.

Houghton, putting his hands to his mouth, shouted out. Not a sound came in reply.

"Quick," said Hull. "Drop everything and after them."

He cast his bundle down, as did the others, and started off down the broadest of the paths before them; it split into three ways, and dividing they each took a path, calling all the time to keep in touch.

They found nothing, and after a while, fearing to lose company, each began to return along the way he had come by, only to be confronted with the fact that he did not know the way; all sorts of feeding ways and side-cuts passed without thinking, formed now a problem more dark than the problem set by the Sphinx.

Keeping in touch by calling, they managed at last to reunite, but they were now utterly mazed, with-

out the least idea in which way to go—and the precious bundles were lost.

Dusk would soon be falling, suddenly, like a shut lid, and they were without food.

"Oh, *cuss* that swine!" cried Hull. "I oughter 'a' put a bullet through his carciss. This is the third fool trick he's played me. It's my fault; I oughter 'a' known."

"That beast Jacky must have played up to him," said Tillman.

Houghton said nothing for a moment. Then he spoke:

"There's no use in abusing them, or thinking of them till we're able to catch them. What we've got to do is to get out of this infernal place; we've got a compass, and if we strike consistently in one direction, we will be all right. That river runs north and south; well, we must strike west, or at least take the most westerly paths we can find."

"Well, I'm blest if I didn't forget the compass," said Hull.

He opened the box containing it, got it level and found the west.

The path directly opposite to where he was standing led due west, and with a load removed from their minds, they started down it. It was only now, with safety in sight, that they began fully to realise the horrible situation from which they were escaping. The thorn tangle had a personality all its own, wicked and malevolent, its intricacy seemed the intricacy of an evil mind set on their destruction.

The path they were on led them in a straight line

for some few hundred yards, and then bent to the right, leading due north.

"Fitchered, b'gosh!" said the Captain. "We're done!"

"Come on," said Tillman. "There's no use stopping, and the light won't last long."

They hurried ahead to a point where the path broke up into three ways, one leading due west.

They struck down the westerly path, and it led them bravely till a curve came in it and they found themselves facing due south.

Tillman felt the sweat standing out on the palms of his hands.

The most terrible result of a maze like this is its demoralising effect.

Hull, with a movement of exasperation, flung away the compass; it fell into the thorn wall on the right of them and stuck there.

Then he folded his arms.

Tillman and Houghton glanced at one another; then Tillman recovered the compass and put it in his pocket.

"I ain't used to it," said Hull, as though he were addressing some fourth and viewless party. "I ain't used to it. It ain't fair on a man, a lee shore ain't in it—cuss the carciss of that onholy blighter; and to think I had him in reach of the grip of my fist—an' let him go!"

Tillman took him by the arm.

"Come on," he said. "There's no use in talking. Our only chance is to keep moving. We'll

get out somehow, and then we'll deal with Macquart."

This latter idea seemed to restore the Captain to his senses, and they started off.

But now, with the suddenness of the tropics, night was on them.

It seemed to rise up from the earth like a mist, and then the stars were shining above.

They kept blindly on; there was sufficient light to let them see their way, but a terrible tiredness was coming on them. Since morning they had been travelling, with only a break for the midday meal, and the excitement which had made them fight their tiredness was now having its own effect.

Tillman stopped where a tree had fallen lengthways in their path.

"We'd better stop and rest," said he. "Here's stuff for a fire, it'll be company; lend us a hand to break some of the branches."

The tree had been dead long enough to make the branches brittle without rotting them, and in a few minutes they had collected enough sticks. Houghton produced a box of matches from his pocket; the flame of the first match caught, and in a moment the fire was crackling and blazing.

Then they sat down round it.

It is not till you are in the wilderness that you know the value of a fire.

A fire holds much more than brilliancy and warmth; to men and to dogs it recalls in the subconscious mind the camp cooking and evening rests from the million years when we were nomads. The

dead Past lives in a fire, just as it lives in music. It was not round a tent pole, but round a fire that the first home was built.

The effect of the fire was greatest on Hull, who, producing his pipe, filled it and lit it. Houghton by the firelight had perceived a prickly pear growing amongst the thorn, and he was engaged in cutting some of the fruit off with his knife, taking care to avoid the prickles.

"See here," said he, "we won't starve nor die of thirst; there's lots of this stuff about, I saw several bushes as we came along. It's the only thing that seems to grow here beside this beastly bramble stuff; have some?"

Tillman took one and, having got rid of the prickles, ate it and found it very good, but Hull refused food just at present; he was content with tobacco and he was busy in his mind with Macquart. His extraordinary intellect seemed to have eliminated Tillman and Houghton from its purview; it was as though all this business concerned him alone, and he seemed to be reviling Fate as well as Macquart, though he never named the lady.

"It's cruel hard," said he, "cruel hard—— No, I don't want none of that prickly stuff; if I can't get man's food, I'll leave it be; I'm not goin' to fill my inside with sich garbige—it's cruel hard to be laid be the heels like this with a d—d bramble hedge givin' one the turn at every p'int. It's playin' it pretty low down on a sailorman to set reefs before him like that ashore. And to think I had a good gun in me hand and didn't put a bullet

through the skin of that blighted scarecrow when I had the chanst. It's the same trick he served me outside the 'baccy shop in Sydney. In I went to get a seegar, and out I come to find him gone. Saw him through the winder as I was lightin' the seegar, and before I'd blown the match out he'd gone. I ought to 'a' known the chap wasn't a man; he's a conjurin' trick on legs worked by the devil, that's what he is, and I ought to 'a' spoiled him when I had the chanst. It was the same fower years ago; left me doped in a pub, he did, and slid off with me money."

"Did he take much?" asked Houghton, more for the sake of saying something than from any interest in the question.

"It's not s'much what he took," said the Captain evasively, "as the way he took it; left me on a mud bank stranded, he did. Never clapped eyes on him again till I sighted him at Sydney."

He had let his pipe go out, and he was relighting it now when, of a sudden, he dropped the match and started to his feet. Some one was hailing them.

The very same voice that Houghton and Tillman had heard that afternoon came again, clearer this time and closer.

"Hi—hi—hi!"

Hull made answer.

"Hullo!" he roared. "Where are you?—Who are you? Hullo!"

Again came the hail, closer now, and away down the path shewn by the starlight amidst the trees, they glimpsed a figure, white, like a ghost.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHAYA FINDS THE BUNDLES

ALL through that day Macquart and the party he was leading to their destruction had been followed by Saji, intent on Macquart and his doings, and with Saji had been Chaya.

It was nothing to them to pursue without being seen, and it was indicative of the mentality of Saji that on a business like this Chaya, his main desire in life, although she was at his side, was obliterated for him by the immediate objective.

As I have said, his mind wore blinkers; when he was hunting he was a huntsman pure and simple, and he had no view of anything else but the quarry. Chaya might have been a dog for all the attention he paid her on this business.

At noon, when the expedition paused for the midday meal, Saji and Chaya kept watch through the trees and when the expedition started again they followed.

Saji had quite a clear understanding of the fact that Macquart was in partnership with the Rubber Man for the purpose of destroying his companions. Had you sifted Saji's evidence before a court of justice, or rather had you sifted the evidence that satisfied Saji about the murderous intentions of Mac-

quart, you would not have obtained a conviction. All the same from what he had observed, from what he had heard, Saji, with his unerring dog instinct, was convinced of Macquart's intentions.

But he did not know how Macquart was going to carry them out. He thought at first that Macquart, relying on Wiart's knowledge of the forest, was going to lead his companions into one of the pit-traps dug by natives for wild animals, but when they arrived at the great thorn maze everything became clear to him. Wiart had explored this place and been through it twice with perfect security owing to the fact that he had blazed his way. Wiart, when the drink was not on him, was an enthusiastic forester and his knowledge of the rubber plant and its habitats was equalled by few. He was also a naturalist. The thorn maze had interested him as it could not fail to do, and Saji, now faced with it, perceived at once the gist and meaning of this expedition. But he would not enter it. He had no need to, for one thing. Instinct told him to get back to the river at once, to hide near Wiart's house and to await the return of Wiart and Macquart. They would come back alone—of that he was certain. Then he could continue his tracking of them, for it was no part of his scheme, laid down by the mother of Chaya, to deal with Macquart till that person arrived at the end of his tether and disclosed the place where John Lant's treasure was really hidden.

"I go back," said Saji, when the party had disappeared into the thorn bush. "The Rubber Man

and the other are leading them there to lose them, then they will come back; I go to meet them quicker than you can follow."

"Go," said Chaya, "I can return alone."

Next moment he was gone.

Chaya knew all about the thorn maze, though she had never entered it; she knew that it was a haunt of evil spirits and the Dyak blood in her veins and vague old traditions in her mind made the place repellent to her. But Houghton had gone in there to his death, and without hesitation she followed, just as the iron filing follows the magnet.

Chaya knew nothing about love, she had never even considered the name of the thing. When Saji had shown his feelings toward her, she had repelled his advances as she would have repelled the fawning of a dog; he had never pressed them.

Once, and once only, he had stroked her arm and she had flung his hand away, angry at his action but not knowing in the least the real cause of her anger. With Houghton it was different. Since first seeing him he had never been out of her mind. He was something quite new. A man like Wiart or the rubber traders, who had sometimes come to the village, but, somehow, absolutely different. Wiart had also made advances to her. Wiart, in fact, had once tried to kiss her and she had repelled him just as she had repelled Saji and just as unconsciously and without knowledge of the evil she was repelling.

But Houghton seemed to her a different being from these, not only on account of his good looks,

which pleased her, but on account of his personality and his power to call her to him and hold her thoughts.

The thought that he was in danger raised in her a feeling of dread as though the danger threatened herself—as to what became of Tillman or Hull, she did not care in the least.

When she entered the thorn tangle the others had got far ahead. The path she was on showed no traces of them and, before she had gone very far, she was confronted with the choice between two paths so alike that they seemed twins.

She chose the wrong one, pursued it for a while, paused to listen and fancied she heard voices. The thorn bush is full of illusion to the person who is alone and listening.

Then she called out several times, but received no answer. It was her voice that Tillman and Houghton and Hull heard. Had they replied to it things might have been different, but they went on to their fate, and Chaya, receiving no answer, went on to hers.

She followed the path till it divided into three ways, chose one of them haphazard, and pursued its winding course till she was lost as surely as the person whom she was trying to find.

And still she kept on, not trying to escape, but endeavouring to find.

She had no thought at all of her own danger; she did not consider in the least the fact that, if she found Houghton, they would be both in the same position—lost.

She just sought for him, filled only by the tremendous passion that only now was beginning to declare itself in her breast.

Something great as the sea, as reasonless, as powerful.

She would find him in this terrible place if she kept on. If she did not find him she might die—it would be the same thing.

She kept on.

Then all at once she found a meeting of the ways and on the ground three bundles. They were the bundles that Hull and his companions had been carrying. She had watched them packed that morning, she had watched them unstrapped at the mid-day meal, and here they were, lying on the ground.

What did it mean?

She sat down beside them. What could it mean? Had Macquart and the Rubber Man slain the others, then? There was no sign of a struggle, no blood. The bundles were just lying there where they had been cast without a sign to tell of the reason why they had been abandoned.

She listened intently and now, sitting there alone, she heard in the utter stillness the voice of the thorn maze, the murmur and drone of a million insects inhabiting this green and treacherous sphinx.

For five minutes she sat without moving—waiting, watching, listening. Then she rose to her feet, looked in every direction, and then, stooping and picking up the bundles, she resumed her way, taking without choice the path she was facing.

The bundles were not too heavy to carry, but

they were awkward; she cast one over her shoulder by its strap, held one under her right arm and the other in her hand. She did not feel the weight nor did their awkwardness trouble her; she had only one thought—the man she was looking for.

Then the darkness came.

This was a terrible moment for Chaya, the gloom filled her mind just as it filled the world, vague terrors rose up before her. Death, starvation, injury, even the terror that lies in entanglement could not influence her or make her turn from her object, but the terrors of darkness daunted her soul. Ghosts of all sorts of superstitions and beliefs that had once haunted the brains of her ancestors awoke in her mind and walked there, paralysing her thoughts. She wished to hide, but there was no place of refuge. Then, as though the darkness were a heavy load bearing her down, she crouched on the ground beneath the stars.

On this, as on nearly all the paths, there were trees sparsely set, and the branches above moving slightly to the faint night wind now obliterated the stars and now let them peep through.

How long she had been crouching thus she could not tell, when something reached her, rousing her from her half-dazed state as a person is roused from sleep.

It was the smell of burning wood.

One of the results of living in the jungle as Chaya had lived, is the power to translate the messages that sounds, sights and smells bring one, from the

language of the jungle into the language of human thought or into thought pictures.

The smell of burning instantly produced in Chaya's mind the picture of a camp-fire.

She sprang erect, and then slowly turned with head half cast up, testing the air in every direction. You could have noticed that she did not "sniff" the wind; she breathed quite naturally and then, assured of the fact that a fire was lighted somewhere about and that the scent of the burning wood was coming on the light breeze, she picked up her bundles and came along the path in the direction she had been going before terror and the darkness had overcome her.

Arrived at dividing ways, she chose the one that led most nearly in the direction of the quarter the wind had come from, and then at a point where it split she was rewarded.

Away down the left-hand path she saw the glow of the fire.

She instantly hailed it, and at once came Hull's answer. She replied and came along clutching the bundles tightly, walking swiftly, scarcely breathing; laughing to herself with joy.

CHAPTER XXIV

HULL IS ENLIGHTENED

WHY, it's a gal," said Hull.

"She's got our bundles," said Tillman.

Chaya advanced straight into the firelight so that the red glow lit her to the waist; she did not seem to see Hull or Tillman, she dropped the bundles one after the other, and still without speaking, and with her wide dark eyes fixed on Houghton, held out both hands to him.

"You!" said Houghton, taking her hands in his. He could say nothing more for a moment, and the others stood by waiting, whilst in the stillness, against the far murmur of the forest, could be heard the faint crackling and flickering of the fire.

"I followed," said Chaya, "fearing the man would leave you to be lost. Then I lost myself looking for you."

She explained, pointing to the bundles as Houghton released her hands, and then they began to understand the bitter truth that this joyful vision was a prisoner like themselves, a butterfly that had managed to get imprisoned with common flies in this huge vegetable fly-trap.

But she had brought the bundles and pushed star-

vation away from them, they were saved for the time being, and as for water, they could never actually die of thirst whilst they had the succulent fruit of the prickly pear, to say nothing of pitcher plants which they had noticed yesterday attached to some of the lianas that hung between the sparsely set tree boles of the paths.

They sat down, Chaya and Houghton rather apart from the others, and Hull, putting some more sticks on the fire, opened his bundle and produced some food. The Captain had become quite cheerful again. It was indicative of his mind that he did not seem in the least interested in Chaya or the problem of how and why she had followed them. The bundle and its contents filled all his thoughts.

"Well," said he, "I never did think I'd have set my teeth in a piece of beef again. Them as likes prickly pears may eat 'em. I can't get on with garbige, nohow. They tell me there's chaps that lives on green stuff like rabbits and enjoys it, chaps with money enough to buy beefsteaks. I'm not beyond likin' a good cabbidge in its place, but it has to be in its place and that's a long way behind a piece of steak. Lord love me! I'd give half my share of that there cache for a steak and taters and onions now, and a cup of corfee."

"Well, you're not likely to get it," said Tillman, who was also engaged on the contents of his bundle. "If you even smell a beefsteak again you'll be lucky—you're not eating, Houghton."

"I'm not hungry," said Houghton.

He was sitting so close to Chaya that their arms

touched and he had just captured her hand which was lying on the ground beside him as if waiting to be captured.

He felt the firm palm and then he felt the fingers close upon his thumb, the most delightful embrace in the whole world.

He knew that she had followed him all that day and that she had risked her own safety by entering the maze in an attempt to save him. He knew that she was lost now just as he was and that Death was literally standing over them. The thought did not trouble him, or troubled him just as little as it troubled her. Love is so tremendous a power that Death, unless it means separation, has no force of way against it. It becomes the little thing that it really is just as that inflated phantom, the centipede, becomes withered leaves under a destructive blow.

Tillman, who had now finished his supper, began to question Chaya. She described her wanderings amongst the thorn. She had never been here before, always avoiding the mysterious place which had the reputation of being haunted.

The reason of this reputation lay in the fact, perhaps, that some natives who had come in here had never returned. One of its names in the Papuan was the Place of Confusion.

"A jolly good name, too," said Tillman; "but you say the Rubber Man has been here several times; how does he know the place so well that he leads us here, yet escapes himself?"

"He is perhaps known to the evil spirits," said Chaya.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Tillman. "He's well enough known to Gin, anyway. Oh, the skunk! If I ever get hold of him."

"What I want to get hold of," said Hull, who had lit his pipe, "is them whiskers. I wants to sit comfortable on that chap's chest and play with them whiskers. I wants a pair of tweezers and no help from no razor. I wants to talk to him, same as a barber does, between the pulls. Show him each hair as I plucks it out; any one else may scalp him as wants to, I only wants his whiskers."

"He won't have much hair left if we ever catch him," said Tillman. "The thing that gets me is that they are mostly likely now at the cache, digging it out like rats. Hull, I didn't say anything about it to you before, but you remember that old burnt ship Houghton and I told you we saw in the lagoon?"

"Ay, ay," replied Hull; "what about it?"

"Well, I believe that was the *Terschelling*."

"The gold ship?"

"The same."

"But the gold ship weren't burnt," said Hull. "Mac said she was sunk at her moorings."

"He lied. She *was* sunk, but she was burnt first, burnt with all aboard her."

Hull pondered on this for a while. Then he burst out:

"But how the mischief was the stuff cached by the river——"

"It wasn't; it was cached by the lagoon, somewhere on the bank. Macquart brought us all up the river for the purpose of finding a chance to do us in. He can get the *Barracuda* out with Jacky."

"Oh, the swab!" said Hull.

The mildness of his language was indicative of the depth, below oaths, in him that was stirred.

"There's one comfort," said Houghton, who was still holding Chaya's hand unobserved by the others, "Wiart is sure to be done in by Macquart if they manage to get the *Barracuda* away. The only live men of those three to be left will be Macquart and Jacky, and Jacky will get his dose after he has been paid off at Sydney. I am firmly of opinion that Macquart is not a devil, he is the Devil."

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!" said Hull, groaning like a person with the stomach ache, "to think of that chap fillin' his pockets with the boodle and us three sittin' here not able to lift a finger. Did any man ever hear the like of that? Us with the guns and pistols and them unarmed."

"It shows you what trickery can do," said Houghton grimly; "what one man, plotting and planning for a definite end, can do against three men who have acted like fools. I'm not speaking against you, Hull, so much as against myself and Tillman. We suspected the chap and we should have tied him to us before coming into this place. Well, it's done and there's no use in grouching. There's just the chance left us that we may get out of this before Mac gets off with the yawl."

"Yes," said Tillman, tapping the ashes out of his pipe, "and we won't be able to do anything unless we're fresh." He yawned, stretched himself on the ground and in a minute his deep breathing told that he was asleep.

Hull in a few minutes followed his example, lying face down and with his head on the crook of his arm.

Houghton turned to Chaya; her face was close to his and in the vague light of the moon that came across the thorn bushes and tree branches her dark eyes gazed at his, then their lips met.

They had never spoken a word of love one to the other, yet they had told each other everything.

CHAPTER XXV

CHAYA STRIKES THE BLAZE

THEY awoke at dawn. Chaya had fallen asleep with her head resting on Houghton's shoulder. She was the first to awake. Houghton had not slept at all. Holding her to him with his arm around her waist, feeling the warmth of her body through the warm girdle of brass beneath her robe, breathing the perfume of her hair, he did not sleep; he dreamt the dream of his life.

She awoke suddenly, raised her head, saw Houghton and then raising her hands seized him by the arm, as though to push him away from her—only for a moment. The remnants of sleep still clinging to her had vanished and her eyes, losing their wild and bewildered expression, grew soft, human and filled with love. The Chaya who had laughed at the battle between the scorpion and the centipede, the Chaya who had led him that day into the outskirts of the forest to laugh at him and elude him, the Chaya who had tracked them yesterday with Saji, not knowing in her own heart the real reason of her care for Houghton, had vanished. This was a new being, a rapturous, warm, living woman. The savage had vanished entirely, the beauty of the sav-

age remained, lending a supreme, indefinable fascination to the beauty of the woman.

"Chaya," whispered Houghton, holding her to him, "all my life I have been waiting for you—listen, before the others wake up, you are mine and never will I let you go."

Chaya sighed deeply. Then she put her arms round his neck. She did not speak one word. She raised her perfect lips to his and the eyes in whose darkness and depth lay the mysteries of the forest and the sea.

Hull, awaking from sleep, saw nothing. Whilst he was rubbing his eyes they had drawn apart; he touched Tillman with his foot and the latter, awaking with a start, sat up.

"Good Lord!" said he, "I dreamt we were out of this and back on the *Barracuda*. What's the time?"

"There ain't no time here," said Hull. "It's after sun-up and time to be movin'. Oh, cuss that swab! I dreamt I'd got him by the short hairs and here I am still on my beam ends." He yawned and yawned, stretched, and then sprang to his feet, rubbing his fingers through his hair and again stretching his back as if to make sure of its strength.

Hull was very much of an animal man and the animal in man never appears more surely than in the act of eating or the moment of awakening from sleep.

"Well," said Tillman, "we'd better have breakfast before we make a move. It's the biggest mistake to set to work on an empty stomach."

They set to on the provisions. Chaya cut some

prickly pears and picked some small red fruit from a bush that grew low down among the thorns. She would touch nothing else.

She watched Hull eating. He seemed to fascinate her and amuse her at the same time. One of her greatest charms was a childishness and gaiety which even their desperate position could not destroy.

She ate her breakfast seated beside Houghton, furtively feeling for his hand now and then, looking at Hull and listening to the conversation, which she could not always understand.

They were discussing ways and means of escape as futilely as children discussing the meaning of an algebraical problem, when Tillman, catching sight of something away down the path, drew their attention to it.

A small dark figure was disporting itself on the ground, approaching them, yet hiding itself as it came behind the tree boles.

"It's a monkey!" cried Hull.

Chaya, who had sprung to her feet and who was standing shading her eyes, laughed.

"It is mine," said she, "it is Mitu." Saji, a long time ago, had killed a monkey on one of his hunting expeditions. The monkey had been carrying a baby monkey in its arms and Chaya, who had been with Saji, rescued the baby and brought it up. It was her pet and it followed her always at a distance, mostly springing along the branches of the trees under which she walked.

On starting with Saji yesterday morning she had

tied Mitu up. It must have escaped and, picking up her traces, pursued her.

She told her companions this in a few words and then went forward to meet her follower. But Mitu was shy. The sight of the white men evidently did not please him. He took to a tree and Chaya, standing beneath it, began to talk to him in the native.

"Blest if she ain't talkin' to it same 's if it was a human," said Hull.

"Leave her alone," said Tillman. "It may be that the beast can lead us out. It followed her all the way from the village and it has found her. If it did that, it can find its way back."

They saw the monkey under the blandishments of Chaya drop from branch to branch. Then it dropped on her shoulder and sat with one arm round her head and its eyes fixed on Hull and his companions.

Chaya continued talking to it as if explaining things, slowly approaching the others as she did so.

"He may lead us," said she. "I do not know. It may be. But I have nothing to tie him with."

Mitu had on a grass collar and he had evidently broken or bitten through the cord that had tethered him. Tillman understood her meaning at once and, searching in his pockets, found six or seven feet of lanyard.

He produced it, and Chaya, sitting down and taking Mitu in her lap, fastened one end of the lanyard to his collar.

Then she let him play about for a while to ac-

custom him to the constraint of the string and then, standing up, spoke to him again.

Mitu, looking preternaturally wise, listened and then started off, taking the way he had come by. Chaya followed him, and the others, picking up their bundles, followed Chaya.

"Well," said Hull, "I never did think I'd be condemned to follow a monkey. We only want a barrel organ to make the show complete. Look at the brute. It's for all the world as if it had five legs."

Mitu's legs were not unlike his tail. He was going on all fours and his progress was not rapid. He would stop to sniff at the leaves and every now and then he would whisk up a tree bole as far as the lead would permit.

Chaya, recognising that he would lead them more swiftly if he were released and allowed to take to his own element—the air—untied the lanyard from his collar and let him loose.

Next moment he was swaying from branch to branch; where the trees were too sparsely set he would take to the ground, and though the progress was sometimes slow it was sure.

On one of the paths along which he led them they came on a strange thing, the skeleton of a man half overgrown with ground vines. Some native trapped long ago in this tangle and, dying of starvation or perhaps simply from fright, had left these bones, just as in the Venus' fly-trap the insect leaves its skeleton.

They did not stop to inspect the dismal thing. They hurried on.

"I don't like meetin' that skillington," said Hull. "It ain't lucky."

"Nonsense," said Tillman. "There's no such thing as luck."

"Ain't there?" replied the Captain. "Well, if there ain't, there's such a thing as bad luck and it seems to me we've struck it. No such thing as luck! Why, I've seen it. You take a ship and alter her name and you'll see it, too, if you go for a cruise in her. Why, there's nuthin' else *but* luck in this here world and you'll know it, me son, when you've seen as much as I have."

An hour later after Mitu had led them, hither and thither and seemingly in all directions, they came on the ashes of the camp-fire. The monkey had brought them back to the very point they had started from.

Chaya sat down and buried her face in her hands; the others stood by speechless and paralysed for the moment.

It was only now, really, that they began to recognise the appalling effect of the maze upon the mind. The feeling of being held—by nothing, baffled—by nothing.

Here they had air, light, liberty and speech, yet they were tied and bound by a viewless conjurer as surely as though he had tied them with visible ropes and thongs.

Hull, the pessimist, was the first to break silence.

"Well, we've got to get out," said he. "I reckon

that skillington has spent itself now we've come back from the place we started from. There's no use in the gal takin' on, she did her best, but I'd like to put a bullet into that durned monkey. I didn't put no store by that monkey."

"Yes," said Tillman, "there's no use in complaining. Let's make a new start and trust to chance."

Houghton was kneeling by Chaya and talking to her in a low tone. Then she rose up. She had been crying, but now she dried her tears, put her hand in Houghton's and followed the others on the new start off.

They had not been an hour on the new endeavour when they were startled by a cry from Chaya.

They turned and found her kneeling by a tree. Houghton was standing beside her and she was pointing to something on the bark.

On the bark, about four feet up from the roots, was the mark of an axe blow. A piece of bark had been cut right out. It was an old injury inflicted on the tree possibly months ago, but it was definite and purposeful and Chaya knew at once its meaning. She rose up and hurried along to the next tree ahead. It shewed nothing. She examined tree after tree and then again she cried out.

When they reached her she was pointing to another mark similar to the first, only slightly higher up. Tillman saw the whole thing at a glance.

"She's struck the blaze," said he. "Can't you see, Wiart or maybe some native has made it—she's saved us."

They followed her as she hurried along. Her

keen eyes, trained to observation, required only one glance at a tree to tell whether it was blazed or not.

She had no difficulty at all at cross-roads, for here every tree was blazed till the right direction was indicated. On straight paths the blaze was rare, it was not really required, yet it was there sometimes as though the man who had made it was so impressed by the possibilities of this terrible place that he determined to leave his mark as often as possible.

The depression and anguish of spirit that had ridden them up to this now completely vanished and the renewed feeling of life and elevation of spirit shewed itself in each man according to his temperament. Tillman whistled. Houghton walked silent, erect, with a brightness in his eye that spoke of a soul relieved from torture. He had suffered more than any of the others. Hull was flushed and swearing, threatening Macquart and making fantastic promises to himself with regard to Wiart's whiskers.

They had not far to go, less than a mile the blaze led them and then vanished where the path of a sudden broke up and delivered them to the forest.

To find the thorn no longer on either side of one was to experience the feelings of a man who escapes from the clutches of a malevolent giant. The atmosphere of the forest was quite different from the atmosphere of the maze; a blind man could have told the difference. There the air seemed stagnant

and like a prison. The life of the forest avoided the place, all but the insect life that buzzed and droned amidst the thorn.

Here the parrots were shrieking and chattering and the little monkeys scurrying amidst the branches and the wind stirring the leaves and bringing with it the perfume of the camphor and cutch trees and a faint fresh something that was perhaps the breath of the sea.

"Thank God!" said Houghton.

Chaya, with the faithful Mitu on her shoulder, looked around her. She was now in her own home; she could find her way in the forest by instinct, possessing that unerring sense of direction more sure than the pointing of the compass.

She led the way now, Houghton beside her and the others following. It was half an hour after noon and they had still almost a day's journey before them ere they could reach the river.

It was now a race for the gold; but just as in the maze they were the prisoners of Confusion, so here in the forest they were the prisoners of Distance. They could not run, nor could they advance fast; the journey required that they should husband all their energies. Barrier lianas sometimes lay in their path so thickly that they had to be cut through and it was absolutely necessary for them to halt every now and then for a short rest.

They flung away their bundles, retaining only in their pockets a few morsels of food, and they would have flung away their guns and ammunition had it been possible.

Sometimes when they rested they talked. Hull grumbled.

"If them two blighters went back to the river," said he, "they'll have taken the boat sure to reach the lagoon, and then where'll we be?"

"We'll have to tramp it," said Tillman. "Make down the river bank as hard as we can pelt, but the chances are they'll have struck for the lagoon through the forest. Wiart seems to know the forest pretty well."

"How long will it take them to unload the cache, I wonder?" said Houghton. "God! it makes me boil to think that we may reach the lagoon only to find the *Barracuda* gone, and we stranded here and those two and that infernal Jacky making for Sydney."

"Don't think," said Tillman. "There's not a ha'pporth of us thinking. We can only do our best, and we're clear of that thorn tangle. Come, let's be getting on."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TREASURE

THE decision of Macquart to seize the treasure if possible for himself and to destroy his companions had been taken on board of the *Barra-cuda* long before they reached the river.

Before starting from Sydney, he had not conceived the idea. His mind had been taken up entirely with the preparations for the expedition, but there had always been a reservation in his mind due to the terms which Screed and the others had exacted from him. Privately, he held himself open to swindle them if he could, but without the least idea of how the thing was to be done.

On board the *Barracuda* his greed, his hatred of Hull and the possibilities that lay in Jacky inspired the first part of the plot.

His original story, as told to Screed and the others, made no mention of the real position of the sunken *Terschelling* or the cache. Indeed, he had purposely put them on the wrong scent by stating that the cache was on the river bank and the ship sunk in the river. He had determined to keep the real position a secret till he was on the spot, and so be master of the situation till the last possible minute.

The wisdom of this plan of action became apparent to him on board the *Barracuda*. When Hull insulted him and made him work, he restrained his anger not only by his will, but by the thought that, having the whip-hand, he would perhaps be able to make the whip felt.

He determined to divulge nothing, to leave the *Barracuda* in the lagoon and to take his companions right up to the Dyak village. Once there, means might be found to get rid of them, and then with Jacky's help all would be plain sailing. He had made a study of Jacky and found him to be a black negation, a mechanism acting to the strongest will brought to bear on it, and Macquart had no doubt as to the strength of his own will.

The only point against the plan lay in the question of the safety of it. Was it safe for him to return to that village from which he had fled fifteen years ago?

Now Macquart was a very clever man, but even very clever men are subject to delusions. The fifteen years he had spent wandering hither and thither about the world seemed to him fifteen ages. He had learned to forget so many things that he fancied himself forgotten, not knowing or remembering that life in a tiny community is not the same as life in the great cities, and that the village has a memory far longer and more retentive than the memory of a town.

Even so, he was not without vague qualms. But the strong desire to get even with Hull, the mad greed to possess everything and an indefinable an-

tagonism that lay between him and Screed were factors too powerful to be over-ridden by vague qualms as to personal safety.

Then there was another very curious factor: the desire, or instinct, to return to the place that was fatal to Lant and might be fatal to himself.

It was the homing instinct that carries the murderer to the place of his crime. An attraction begotten of repulsion.

Having made his plan, he stuck to it. Leaving the *Barracuda* in the lagoon, he brought his companions up the river, and though the first sight of Wiart upset his ideas and made him dread the presence of a white witness, he had not been long in that gentleman's company before he recognised in him a helper and a tool absolutely as though Satan had placed Wiart at his disposal.

Then, to gain time, he prepared the faked treasure-digging expedition to the river spit, and then having made sure that Wiart was fit for the business and ripe for it, all of a sudden he disclosed the whole thing to him.

Nothing could have appealed more to Wiart. As overseer of the rubber business he received two thousand dollars a year, and the climate was breaking his health. If the villainy failed, it would only mean three dead men in the jungle and a return to the rubber business. If it succeeded, it would mean unlimited money and the delights of civilisation in the form of women, wine, raiment and ease.

Wiart was an unspeculative individual, else per-

haps he would not have endured his life up to this so well. He never thought for a moment that this gold for which he was prepared to do anything might be a thing more dangerous to touch than a live dynamo—when Macquart was the object through which he touched it.

Not a bit. With the gleeful acquiescence of a schoolboy enticed to rob apples, he helped to shoulder the infernal scheme, and more, he engaged to put it through.

He knew the forest and its possibilities, and it was his ingenious scheme to make the forest a criminal.

He would not aid in killing. The forest would do all that, by the hands of its child, the great Thorn Tangle.

Now on its northern side the Thorn had only one broad way of entrance. Wiart on his first exploration of the place had blazed his way, and quite confident of returning on his trail had wandered far, coming out on the western side at last by the purest accident. He had made another expedition in search of beetles only a few weeks before the arrival of Macquart and his companions and he knew that, whilst for himself and whoever he might lead the place was safe, it was death to any unfortunate led into it without knowledge of the blaze.

Once he had got far enough and finding the others some way behind, he had waited till a bend in the path helped by the trees hid his actions. Then he had given the word, "Full speed." We know

the rest, as far as it concerns Hull and Houghton and Tillman.

As for Macquart and his two companions, they did not speak, till, led by the rubber man, they were free of the maze.

It had been debated between them as to whether Jacky was to be taken into their confidence by word of mouth. Wiart was for telling him the whole thing and making him an accomplice; but Macquart refused. "If we can get rid of them as easy as you say, where's the use of telling the nigger?" said he. "He won't know whether they've stayed behind from choice or got left, and he has no brains to guess with, I reckon; if any explaining is to be done, we'd better leave it till we are at sea."

Wiart had agreed, and now clear of the maze, with Jacky following them, they struck west, led by Wiart. Wiart was very much more than a drunkard. Half English, half Dutch, his father had been a botanist employed by the Dutch government in forest work in Borneo. Wiart had been born with the instinct of the forest in his blood. He could not lose himself, especially in these forests that he knew so well. He was following now a line of demarcation between a vast grove of dammar trees and a mixed wilderness of camphor, cutch and teak, and now he was skirting a huge boggy patch where rubber trees and nipah palms grew in profusion.

"You are certain we are going right?" said Macquart.

"Sure," replied Wiart. "I could tell my way by the smell, but don't waste time in talking, for I

want to reach more open ground before dark. Where we're heading there is a big tract of very open ground leading within a mile of the river, where the trees close up again. You remember, we came through it this morning—but perhaps you did not notice. Men don't in forests, but to me a thinning of the trees that would not be very noticeable to ordinary folk is as sure an indication as a street would be."

"Go ahead," said Macquart.

At sundown they paused to rest and partake of some food.

"Well," said Macquart, as he ate, "we have got our arms free at last; it's all plain before us now, unless those chaps work their way out of that booby-trap; if they do and if they catch up with us, well—they've got the guns."

Wiart said nothing for a moment; he was busy eating. Then he said:

"You needn't worry. Leave that to them. They'll have enough of it before they are done. Besides, if they did manage to get out, what are they to say? Is it our fault that they lost themselves?"

"I tell you this," said Macquart. "That chap Hull wouldn't stop to ask whose fault it was. There wouldn't be the least little bit of good in putting up a defence. He'd shoot, and shoot on sight. I know him. There wouldn't be any use saying to him, 'It's not our fault,' or trying to make excuses."

"Well," said Wiart, "when he gets out of that

place he's at liberty to do as he chooses, as far as I'm concerned. I'm not afraid."

They resumed their way, now beneath the starlight and the glow of the rising moon.

The forest glowed green to the moonlight, the green of the deep sea cave to which penetrates a few rays of the sun; the loops of the liantasse and the lianas sagging from the tree boles shewed like ropes, and the orchids clinging to them like marine growths. The monkeys, knowing by some instinct that they were unarmed, pursued them, pelting them with nuts and bits of stick, but they did not even look up.

A little before midnight they reached the river, and skirting the village they came down to the landing-stage. Here Macquart, having fetched the pick and shovel from the tent, waited whilst Wiart went to the house to collect what money he had there and to fetch his rifle.

By the stage was moored the boat, and near the boat a canoe. It was Saji's.

"We're in luck," said Macquart. "I was fearing that the boat might have been taken off by some one or gone adrift. It's just the sort of thing that might happen to spoil everything—but it hasn't."

"If by any chance they get out of that place," said Wiart, "they might follow us in that canoe—there's just room for three in it."

"Leave that to me," said Macquart.

He went to the canoe and untied the grass-rope painter that held it to the stage, then bringing the

canoe up, he followed his companions into the boat and they pushed off.

Canoe and boat floated out into the current, and Macquart, who had shipped the stern oar whilst Wiart took the bow, did not perceive a dark form half start from the bushes of the landing-stage and then take cover again.

Macquart, by his seizure of the canoe, had won the second move in this game he was playing against Fate. But he did not know it. He was quite unaware of the fact that he had been recognised by the woman who had been waiting fifteen years for his return, or that he had been followed by Saji. He recognised nothing and cared for nothing now but the fact that his object was nearly accomplished.

Half a mile down the river he stopped rowing, and ordering Jacky, who was in the stern sheets, to haul the canoe up by its tow rope, he scuttled it, capsizing it with the help of the out-rigger.

It sank like a bottle, and the boat resumed its way.

The river vaguely decked with mist lay under the moon, making a fairy-like picture as it flowed by the chanting, moon-stricken forests. Great bats passed them, fouling the air, and the splash of a jumping fish now and then cast rings across the water. Now and then a great white feathery moth circled around them like a fragment of mist, and vanished as though dissolved.

With the oars and the current, they were making five knots, so that, allowing for rests on the way, they reached the lagoon opening in less than

two hours. The *Barracuda* was lying just as she had been left, berthed by the trees on the banks. A horde of little monkeys were camped on board her, but they had done no harm and at the sight of the approaching boat they scuttled away, taking to the tree branches, from where they observed the doings of the newcomers.

Macquart brought the boat alongside, and they scrambled on board, where on the deck Wiart collapsed, declaring himself fagged out.

"I must turn in and have a bit of sleep," said he. "I've been at it now since yesterday morning and I'm not as young as I used to be. There's no use in spoiling the job by over-haste. Those chaps are fixed, even if they escape they have no boat to follow us with, so where's the use in us killing ourselves?"

"All right," said Macquart. "I'll give you four hours. It'll be near sunrise by then. As for myself, I can't sleep."

They opened the hatch and went below, where Wiart tumbled into a bunk and was soon snoring.

Macquart had lit the swinging lamp, and he sat now under it at the cabin table, smoking.

There were food and drink in plenty to his hand, but he touched neither. He wanted no support or stimulant. He wanted nothing but just to sit and smoke and dream.

He had succeeded. He possessed the *Barracuda* and two hands to help work her. Half a million of money in gold lay only waiting to be shipped,

and he had settled the score between himself and Hull.

The hatred of Macquart for Hull was a passion indicative of the man's nature. Hull had never done half as much injury to him as he had done to Hull. The way Hull had manhandled him on board the *Barracuda* would, one might have thought, been sufficient to account for this hatred; as a matter of fact, whilst strengthening it, it had no connection with its cause.

He hated Hull because the latter had turned up in Sydney just at the moment when he had triumphed over all obstacles. It was the intrusion of his past at the psychological moment when his new future was forming. Hull was the concrete expression of all Macquart's failures, wretchedness, crimes and general disabilities. He was also, of course, a possible sharer of profits, but the latter fact was less than the former, and the bad soul of Macquart rose against him from its most uttermost and powerful depths.

This being so, imagine his feelings when Screed sprang Hull upon him at the moment of starting. Hull, from whom he fancied he had escaped!

Well, he had paid Hull out; he had disposed of Tillman and Houghton; there remained only Screed, Screed waiting quietly at Sydney to gobble half the profits of the expedition.

He determined in his own mind that this should not be. Screed in his cleverness imagined that he had a tight hold on the expedition for the simple reason that to dispose of the findings without risk

of exciting suspicion and enquiry, a "fence" was needed. A rich and well-to-do business man with business connections and a banking account. But Screed had never dreamed of Wiart. Wiart, despite his drinking habits and his position as a factor, had large connections in the Dutch Settlements, and a dark scheme was now evolving in the mind of Macquart by which these connections might be exploited without Wiart having a finger in the pie. A drunkard can never be trusted. Wiart would have to go; but he might be made very good use of before he was extinguished.

Jacky would have to go at the last when he had done his work. The gold was imperative in its terrible demands. No witness must be left of the whole of this business.

So deep in thought was Macquart that he did not notice the passing of time. It might be said that he slept a sleep that was full of dreams.

Rousing from it, he stood up and stretched himself. Then he turned and looked at Wiart, who was lying in the bunk breathing heavily, with his mouth half open.

Macquart smiled as he looked at the helpless figure before him; then he turned and lit the stove to make some coffee, and when that was done he set out some biscuits and canned meat. He let Wiart sleep till the last moment possible. Then he awakened him.

Wiart roused himself up, yawned and looked about him. He did not recognise his whereabouts

for a moment. Then, when he came fully to his senses, he put his leg over the bunk edge.

"I was dreaming that I was tangled up in that thorn scrub," said he; "couldn't get my bearings no-ways." He rubbed his eyes, got on to the floor and came to the table.

"Where's the black fellow?" he asked.

"Jacky? Up on deck. He'll be cooking himself some breakfast in the galley. I made this coffee over the methylated stove so as not to be bothered with him."

Wiart drank his coffee.

"And now," said he, "I suppose there's nothing to do but go for that location of yours and get the stuff on board."

"Nothing. But we must take the yawl across the lagoon first."

"How's that?"

"Because the stuff is buried on the other side."

"Oh, Lord!" said Wiart. "We'll have to tow her."

"That's about it."

"And why in the nation didn't you anchor on the other side to begin with?"

"For the very good reason that the ship was sunk on the other side and I didn't want those chaps to see her bones. But they did, all the same. Two of them went cruising about the lagoon in the boat and spotted the burnt timbers sunk by the bank over there. I thought for a moment it was all up, but the fools never suspected. They came

back with the yarn that they had found a wreck under the water, and they never suspected."

"D—n asses," said Wiart. "She was burnt, you said?"

"Yes."

"That chap Lant must have been a peach."

"He was."

"And to think that girl Chaya was his daughter—well, she's a chip of the old block, and I reckon, if she had any idea this stuff we're after belonged to the father and if she knew we were on to it, she'd be after us."

Macquart moved uneasily.

Chaya was the only hint of that past which he still vaguely dreaded. He had seen nothing of her mother, scarcely anything of the Dyaks. Brave enough to go back to the scene of John Lant's undoing, he had not been brave enough to make enquiries or go near the Dyak village.

"Anyhow," said he, "she doesn't know. No one has any idea of the whereabouts of that stuff but myself. Well, if you have finished, let's set to work."

They came on deck, where they found Jacky, who, as Macquart had surmised, was engaged on some food he had cooked for himself in the galley. They waited until he had finished, and then they landed and cast off the hawsers. Then they fixed the warp for towing. This done, they rowed across the lagoon to the opposite bank to find a suitable berth.

The day was strong now in the sky, and when they reached the opposite bank, they could see

vaguely outlined in the water beneath the boat, the bones of the *Terschelling* like the ghost of a black skeleton.

"She was a big ship," said Wiart, who seemed fascinated by the sight below.

"Fairly big," said Macquart. "There's her stern. Well, we'll bring the yawl over and moor her abaft the stern; that camphor tree marks the position."

They rowed back, took up the warp and began towing. The *Barracuda* came along easily enough. The difficulty was to bring her to her right position beside the bank. In doing this, they nearly got the boat stranded on the stern part of the wreck of the *Terschelling*, but they managed the job at last and as the rays of the sun began to strike strongly through the upper branches of the trees, they had her in position, moored stem and stern.

"Now," said Macquart, "for the digging."

His cheeks showed a flush above the beard, and his eyes were brilliant with excitement. There was a spare mattock on board, and this was brought on shore, also a compass and three mat baskets.

Jacky and Wiart shouldered the pick and the two mattocks, Macquart carried the compass. He took a line leading due south from the stern of the wreck and led the way straight into the forest. He led them for a hundred yards or so, and then stopped for a moment, glancing about him and seeming to listen. It was as though he were fearful of their being followed or surprised. But there was no sound other than the crying of the parrots,

the wind in the trees, and now and then cutting through the air the rasping call of a cockatoo.

Macquart led on.

And now the trees began to thin out and then, suddenly, the ground rose before them, forming a little hill on which nothing grew except a few trees like the pandanus, but bearing no fruit.

The hill was evidently formed by an uprising of the same strata to which the Pulpit Rock at the entrance of the river, in some mysterious way, belonged, for from the hilltop broke two rocks, in structure exactly like the Pulpit, though each of them was not more than six or seven feet in height.

They were situated thirty feet, or more, apart. When Macquart reached the space between these rocks, he sat down on the ground as if exhausted. Wiart, standing beside him and glancing round, noticed that the elevation of the hill gave him a view far over the trees to southward, whilst the trees to northward barred all view of the river.

The ground to the south was, in fact, covered mostly by low-growing mangroves feeding their roots in marshy land and reaching to the coast ridge, where the foliage of other trees barred the view of the sea.

"Well," said Wiart, "how much further have we to go?"

"We are on the spot," said Macquart. He struck his hand, palm downward, on the ground as he spoke.

"Good," said Wiart.

He put his mattock down and took his seat be-

side Macquart, whilst Jacky stood by holding the spare mattock and pick and gazing round him, with eyes wrinkled against the sunshine, at the far stretches of mangrove forest over which was hanging a vague blue haze.

Jacky belonged to the primitive order of things. Amongst all native races you will find specimens of manhood that seem still clung about by the atmosphere of the stone age. I am not so sure that you will not find these specimens of humanity also in the Highly Civilised world, but in the native peoples the fact is more striking because the specimens are more ingenuous and unvarnished.

Jacky—I have left his full description till now—was a man standing six feet in height and exceedingly powerful in make and build. Tillman said that he had the strength of three men, and Tillman scarcely exaggerated his facts when he made this statement. Yet, despite his strength and his height, one did not think of this individual as a man; one thought of him more as a child. For one thing, his mind was primitive almost to childishness, for another his movements were lithe and supple and rapid as the movements of a boy.

In this superb animal dwelt a mind that seemed light and shallow and restless as the mind of a bird. A mind engaged always with little immediate things. Not an evil mind, but a mind so unspeculative and mobile that it could be moved towards evil or good by any determined intelligence that chose to grapple with it.

Jacky had shouted at a Salvation Army meeting,

had been exhibited, like a vegetable, as a fine specimen of what earnest Christian endeavour could do working in primitive soil, had broken a man's head in during a row in Tallis Street, had saved a boy's life from a shark in Lane Cove, helped in a burglary—anything that came along was good enough for Jacky, and it all depended on circumstance and external pressure as to the manner in which he would act.

Tillman had engaged him for the expedition and was his real master, but he had never paused to ask himself questions as to what had become of Tillman and the others, or whether they had been betrayed. He took Macquart's lead just as the *Barra-cuda* took the lead of the tow rope, and he stood now gazing about him with no thought of anything except whatever vague thoughts the scene around him inspired.

Macquart, after a moment's rest, rose to his feet and seized the pick.

There was about the whole of this business some touch of the enchantment which hangs around the story of Aladdin alone with the Eastern magician on that desolate plain above the treasure cave.

Wiart felt it as he stood watching Macquart, who, now pale and perspiring, stripped of his coat and handling the pick, seemed for a moment paralysed, vacillating, filled with indecision and, one might almost have fancied, fear.

It seemed impossible now, at the supreme moment, to believe that the treasure was really here. This thing that had haunted him for fifteen years,

pursued him about the world, held him away from it by fear and drawn him towards it by desire, had become for him an obsession, almost a religion. It was the embodiment of all his desires, the reverse of the medal struck by a Deity that had condemned him to a life of failure and crime. Here at last was to be glimpsed all that he had missed, all that he had failed to reach, all that he had seen from a distance, all that he had envied.

Macquart was no little man. He might have been a great man but for the fatal flaws in his character. He was fundamentally defective. Drunkenness, vice, laziness—all these may be outgrown, lived down, lived over, all these may be simply functional diseases of the soul to be cast aside as the soul expands and comes to its own. But the disease of Macquart was a crookedness in the grain and texture of his mind, a want, a blindness to the right and wrong of things, a negative ferocity that became positive when his desires were checked or excited. His fit of indecision and hesitation did not last many moments before, raising the pick, he set to work.

The ground was hard on the surface, but a few inches below it was soft sandy soil that promised easy work for the mattocks.

Working methodically, he broke the ground over an area of some ten or fifteen square feet. Then, dropping the pick, he called to Wiart to help and they set to work at the digging. The point he had chosen was almost exactly midway between the two rocks, and they dug without a word, silently, furi-

ously, making the soil fly to right and left, whilst Jacky now and then lent a hand, relieving the exhausted Wiart.

After twenty minutes' toil, they paused from pure exhaustion. Then they resumed work again, work the most terrible ever undertaken by man. When the shovel begins to bring up despair, the treasure digger knows exactly the measure of his task and not before. Macquart labouring, pale as a corpse, hollow-eyed and with his mouth gaping, had paused for a moment when Wiart, who had retaken the mattock from Jacky, struck something, lifted his shovel, and then with a cry as though he had unearthed some terrible object, cast the contents of the shovel on the ground. He had brought up a spadeful of coins, broken wood, like the wood from which cigar-boxes are made, and earth. The golden coins were scarcely tarnished.

Macquart spoke not a word. He was standing with his mattock in his hand, his eyes fixed alternately on the find and on Wiart, who was now kneeling pointing to the gold and looking up at him.

He did not seem for a moment to comprehend what had happened and then, all of a sudden, he was on his knees, laughing like a lunatic and delving his hands in the place where the mattock had struck. Fistfuls and fistfuls of gold coins he brought up, holding them out in his wide-open palm for Wiart to look at, whilst Wiart, with his arm round Macquart's neck, half demented, inarticulate, and crowing like a child, picked up coins and threw them down.

It was a terrible picture of momentary mental overthrow.

A huge bird passing overhead trailed its shadow across them, and Macquart with a cry cast his arm over the stuff he had been delving with his naked hand, and glanced up. He saw the bird, and as if this incident had brought him back to reason, he sat up, brushed the soil from his hands and pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"It's half in English coin and nearly half in French," he said. "God! to think it's here. There's some Dutch coin. It's all packed in boxes—so big." He held his hands a foot and a half apart. "You have broken one of the boxes; look, here's the wood. Pretty rotten it is. We must be careful how we go. Why, d—n it, we've already lost hundreds of dollars by your carelessness; look at the way you've flung those sovereigns about!" He picked up an Australian sovereign, light yellow like brass; he held it between his finger and thumb whilst he spoke. He seemed not to be able to let it go. He could not escape from the fascination of the thing or from the idea that he was in possession of a bank where these things lay in thousands, thousands, thousands. As he talked, he rubbed it on his left hand as if wishing to feel its existence with a new set of nerves. Wiart, with swollen face and the dazed look of a man who has been drinking, listened in a careless way and laughed at the other's reproaches.

"We'll pick 'em up," said he. "Where's the use of bothering? Suppose we lose one or two, will

that make us any the poorer? What we've got to do now is to cart the stuff down to the boat. Lucky we brought those baskets."

He rose and, taking one of the mat baskets, began to collect the coins, sifting them from the earth in which they lay. Macquart helped, whilst Jacky, squatting on his hams, held the basket wide open.

It took a long time to collect all the loose coins in view, and then Macquart, with his sleeves rolled up and just as a person breaks up honeycomb, delved with his hand in the remains of the box they had broken open and extracted by handfuls the last of its contents.

"There are hundreds more boxes," said Macquart, sitting back and wiping his brow, "hundreds and hundreds. We brought them up in sacks, the whole crew working double shifts. Tons and tons of gold. The English stuff is atop, the French and Dutch below."

"Let's go steady now," said Wiart. "No more spade work, we'll dig 'em up with our hands and so avoid breaking them. They're all packed close together, I suppose?"

"Side by side," replied Macquart.

Kneeling opposite to one another, the two men began carefully to remove the earth, till the whole top of the second gold box was uncovered. It seemed solid, though the metal bindings at the corners were black with rust. Working it loose very gently, Macquart got one hand under it for the purpose of lifting it, when the whole thing burst

to pieces and the coins came tumbling out in a jingling cataract.

"Curse it," said Wiart; "this is going to give us trouble."

It did. Had the boxes not been rotten with age, the transportation of the gold to the lagoon bank would have been a difficult business, but feasible. As it was, the handling and collecting of all this loose stuff was an appalling task, the significance of which was just beginning to loom before them. But it did not daunt them. They set to work, and in less than half an hour they had collected every loose coin, and the two baskets containing the first of the treasure were ready for transportation. Then they found that one basket was more than one man could carry if it were to be brought any distance—that is to say, for a white man. Jacky made no difficulty at all about carrying one, yet even for him it was a maximum load. They settled the difficulty by carrying a basket between them with the help of the pick shaft through the handles, Jacky following with the other. They left Wiart's rifle and ammunition, which they had brought with them, by the cache, and started.

There was no difficulty in finding the way; before they had covered half the distance, the shimmer of the lagoon led them through the trees, but when they reached the *Barracuda* they were so exhausted by all they had gone through and by the weight of their load that they sat down for a moment to rest before completing the business.

"This stuff will finish us before we've done with

it," said Wiart. "Good Lord! I never did work like this before. Look at me! I'm wringing wet."

"Jacky," said Macquart, "hop on board and fetch us a jug of water; bring a bottle of gin and a glass with you—we've earned a drink."

Jacky, leaving his basket on the bank, climbed over the rail of the *Barracuda*, went to the saloon-hatch, paused for a moment to sniff, as if he smelt something for which he could not account. Then he began to go down the companion-way. He had not taken four steps down the ladder when he suddenly vanished as though snatched below, and a scream, heart-rending and appalling, pierced the air. Then came a muffled cry, the sound of a struggle and silence. The two men on the bank sprang to their feet and stared at one another in terror.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HORROR IN THE HATCHWAY

WITH the sound of the struggle the *Barracuda* had rocked slightly, sending a ripple out over the smooth surface of the lagoon. She now lay perfectly still.

"It's those chaps that have escaped and got on board her," said Wiart. "They're hiding there and waiting for us."

"Not they," said Macquart. "It's something else. It's maybe natives." He was white to the lips and small wonder, for nothing could be more sinister or devilish than the way in which Jacky had vanished, as though the *Barracuda* had snatched him into her maw. Then, suddenly, Macquart turned to the other.

"Off with you back and fetch the rifle," said he. "I'll stay here and watch. Quick, there's no time to be lost."

Wiart turned and started off amidst the trees, and Macquart, withdrawing a bit, stood leaning against a tree bole with his eyes fixed on the *Barracuda*. As he stood like this, waiting and listening, a crash came from the cabin of the yawl. It was the crash of crockery ware upset and broken and it only wanted

that and the dead silence that followed to put a cap on the horror.

Natives would not carry on in this way. If they had seized Jacky and killed him, they would not remain in dead silence.

Minute after minute passed and then a soft sound from behind him made Macquart turn. It was Wiart with the rifle.

"There's some one on board," said Macquart, in a low voice. "There's just been a big upset in the cabin. One of us has got to board her and have a look down the hatch whilst the other stands by ready to shoot if any one comes up. We've got to see this thing through, and quick."

"Well, I'd rather you went aboard than me," said Wiart. "I'm no coward, but this thing gets me. It's not natural."

"Natural or unnatural, we've got to finish with it," replied the other. "We have no time to waste. There's the gold lying waiting to be taken aboard and here are we waiting like fools. It's not a pleasant job, but we'll draw lots."

He plucked two blades of grass of unequal length, held them in his closed hand and held his hand to Wiart.

"Whoever draws the longest goes," said he.

Wiart drew a blade, then they compared the blades. Wiart's was the longest.

He was no coward, yet he held back just for a moment. Then, picking up his courage and handing the rifle to his companion, he walked straight to the

yawl, boarded her, and, without a moment's hesitation, came to the open saloon hatch.

He peeped cautiously down, then turned towards Macquart and shook his head to indicate that he saw nothing.

Then, shading his eyes with his hand, he looked down again.

He left the saloon hatchway and came to the skylight; this was closed, however, and could only be opened from below, whilst the thick glass prevented any view being obtained of the interior.

He was fiddling with the skylight in a stupid sort of attempt to open it, when, suddenly, from the saloon hatch appeared a vast hand that seemed covered by a black woollen glove. It grasped the combing and almost immediately, squeezing up through the hatch opening, came the head, shoulders and chest of an enormous ape.

It was the great monkey of New Guinea. A creature as large as the gorilla, yet far more human and, strange to say, more malevolent at all events in appearance. The gorilla impresses itself upon the mind of the gazer at once as a monkey, but the great ape of New Guinea takes his frightfulness from the fact that the idea "man" connects itself with the vision of him, not "monkey."

He is like a great ruffian man gone to neglect in the primæval woods, his humanity clinging to him like a shame.

Macquart was so astonished by this apparition that he did not even call out to Wiart, and Wiart, who was still engaged in wrestling with the sky-

light, did not see the object that had appeared on deck till a faint sound made him turn.

He had picked up a belaying pin to help him in his work, and now, as he stood facing the Horror that had materialised itself at such a short distance from him, his hand, unfortunately for himself, instead of releasing the iron pin, clutched it spasmodically. It is quite possible that the brute might not have touched him. Creeping along by the bank and finding the *Barracuda*, it had boarded the yawl for the purpose of exploring it. Down below, it had been on the point of coming up when Jacky made his appearance on the saloon ladder. Then, sure that all this was a trap and Jacky the setter of it, the great monkey had seized the intruder by the leg, hauled him down, and finished him. Again it had been on the point of making its escape when the sound of Wiart coming on board had made it pause. Then, hearing the fumbling at the skylight and seeing a fair way up the companion ladder, up it came and another moment might have taken it off over the side had not Wiart, in a paroxysm of terror, hurled the belaying pin.

It struck the brute full in the mouth. Then Macquart, who had raised his rifle to his shoulder, but who dared not fire, so tremulous was his hand and so close together the antagonists, saw the monkey seize the man and hold him out with both hands as a furious mother might seize a naughty child. It shook him.

It did not seem to do anything more than that,

and then it was gone, and Wiart was lying on the deck hiccoughing.

He hiccoughed several times and put his hand to his side as if it pained him. He did not speak or take any notice of Macquart. His mind seemed dulled or far away. Then, all of a sudden, as Macquart boarded the yawl, Wiart turned on his back.

He was dead.

Macquart stood looking from the corpse at his feet to the spot where the monkey had disappeared into the trees.

He did not seem to understand fully for a moment what had happened. In fact, he did not realise fully that Wiart was dead till, kneeling down beside him, he raised his arm and dropped it. Then all at once the truth broke on him. The terrible truth.

He did not care a button for the life of Wiart. The life of Wiart was of no more concern than the buttons on Wiart's coat. What concerned him greatly was the fact that, if Jacky were dead below or seriously injured, he—Macquart—would be helpless. Even if he could get the *Barracuda* out single-handed, how could he tackle single-handed the transport of the gold? This thought occurred to him, but he did not appreciate the true significance of it yet.

He released Wiart's arm, rose up and approached the saloon hatchway.

For a moment he stood listening, then he called down the hatch to Jacky, but received no answer.

Down below there was absolute stillness, a silence accentuated by the faint buzzing of flies.

Then Macquart came down. The body of Jacky was lying right across the table with its head overhanging the end opposite to the door. The swinging lamp had been swept away and a tray of glasses and crockery-ware lay smashed on the floor. Otherwise there was little sign of confusion or struggle, but there was in the air a faint, vague odour of wild beast that caught Macquart by the throat and made the soul in him revolt.

Jacky was quite dead.

Macquart opened the skylight by means of the lever and the fresh air of day came down so that one could breathe.

The immediate problem now before Macquart was the disposal of Jacky's body. It could not be left here. It must be got overboard. He proceeded to the task and found, after ten minutes' labour, that it was utterly beyond him. With the greatest difficulty he managed to pull and drag the body to the foot of the companion-way, but he could not get it up. After all sorts of fruitless endeavours, he paused to think. He could think of nothing. The only way to bring it up was with a tackle, but that would require not only a man to haul on the purchase, but a man to guide the body. Besides, he had not the means nor the skill. He sat down for a moment on the edge of a bunk. He was thinking, not of the body lying at his feet, but of the gold.

This was the beginning of a nightmare business. Gold! Gold! Gold! Tons of it waiting to be

lifted and deported, a dead man lying on the cabin floor of the yawl, another on the deck, and one man with only one pair of hands left to face the task.

Even were he to get the gold aboard, how could he put to sea with that corpse in the cabin? It was very problematical if he could get the *Barra-cuda* out at all, single-handed as he was, but even if it were possible how about this dreadful supercargo?

Even if he were to store the gold in the fo'c'sle and tiny hold and close up the cabin hermetically, sealing hatch and skylight, how could he steer for any port? There would at once be an enquiry and an examination of the boat; even if he were to return to Sydney, the port officer who boarded him and who was refused entry to the cabin would very soon have the rights of the matter.

The corpse of Jacky acted on him much as the whaleman's drogue acts upon the harpooned whale. He could not escape from it and it was bound to ruin him in the end—even if he managed to get the gold on board.

But Macquart's brain just now was not in a condition to recognise clearly or weigh exactly. Having sat for a minute or so on the edge of the bunk, he rose up and came on deck.

Here the first thing he saw was the body of Wiart lying just as he had left it—but—there was a bird circling in the air above it and already one of the eyes was gone!

In this terrible climate to be dead and be devoured are synonymous terms.

Macquart stared at the sight before him. Then he tried to get Wiart overboard. It was a most terribly difficult business. Wiart did not seem to want to go in the least; once or twice when he slipped back on to the deck, just as Macquart had almost got him over the rail, his face in the full glare of the sun shewed a grin as if he were deriding the efforts of the other. The injury to the eye gave him the appearance of having just fought with some one, his clothes were in disorder, his collar half off, and his necktie all askew. From a distance, as Macquart recommenced the business of trying to get him over, it looked as though a drunken man were being ejected from the *Barracuda*. This time Macquart was successful and the body went over and floated off on the current that flowed riverwards past the yawl.

It was an hour after noon now and Macquart, who had not eaten since dawn, felt faint from his exertions and from want of food. Leaving aside this feeling, he was afflicted with a slight confusion of thought or rather want of power in co-ordinating his thoughts.

He went into the galley and found the remains of the food left by Jacky that morning. In the locker on the right-hand side there was plenty more food. Biscuit tins and cans of preserved meat and vegetables, condensed milk and so forth.

Macquart ate, and as he ate his eyes roamed about hither and thither. He read the Libby and Armour labels on the meat cans and the measure of his extraordinary position might have been taken

from the feeling of incongruity and strangeness with which these commonplace labels filled his mind.

The place where he was seemed as remote from the ordinary world as Sirius.

He could hear a faint chuckle now and then as the lagoon water lapped the planks and occasionally a faint groan from the rudder. There were all sorts of little facts about the lagoon that spoke in all sorts of little ways only to be distinguished and interpreted by a person who had nothing to do but listen.

Thus the drift of the current was unequal in rapidity; sometimes a fairly strong swirl would lip the bow and swing the rudder to starboard a few inches, or a log would come along half-submerged and rub itself against the planking, or a faint bubbling sound would tell of a spring blowing off its superfluous water in the lagoon floor.

The lagoon, seemingly so dead and inert, was, in reality, always at work, fetching in driftwood from the river, expelling it again, raising or lowering its level in some mysterious way independent of the sea tide or river flow, stopping up old well-heads on its floor, opening new ones, getting rid of all the detritus that a tropical forest hands to the water.

Macquart sat for a while, after he had finished eating, listening to these vague and indeterminate voices; then, though the gold was always in his mind, the recollection of the two baskets of treasure left on the bank came to him for the first time.

He left the galley, landed, and seized the basket

that Jacky had laid down before going to his death. Then, struggling on board with it, he stood undecided as to what he should do.

It was impossible to store anything in the cabin. He could not go down to that place again. There remained the hold and the fo'c'sle. He had never explored the little hold, but he knew the fo'c'sle; he came to the fo'c'sle hatch, paused a moment, and then, just as a person shoots coal into a cellar, he emptied the contents of the bag down it. He had no time to waste stowing this cargo whose horrible proportions in relation to his puny efforts were ever looming before him. It was like being in front of a great golden mountain that had to be removed piece by piece and in pocketfuls. Added to this fantastic labour would come—on its completion—the problem of escape from the lagoon in the *Barra-cuda* single-handed; added to this the terrible problem of the disposal of Jacky's remains.

No man outside of Nightmare-land was ever confronted with such a position as that which faced Macquart, urged on by gold lust.

In the grasp and under the whip of the gold demon, all the powers of his mind were subservient to the main desire.

He turned now with the empty basket in his hand, regained the shore and came back with the other full basket, shot the contents down the fo'c'sle hatch, listened till the jingle of the last rolling coin ceased, and then flushed, breathing hard and full of new life and energy, started off, with both baskets rolled up under his arm, for the cache.

Here, with one of the mattocks, he cleared the earth carefully away from the next treasure box and then, working with his hands, began to extract it. Work as carefully as he might, the rotten wood of the box sides broke to pieces and the coins fell about loose; he had no one to hold the basket open and he spent ten minutes in fruitless attempts to devise some method to keep the thing erect and yawning.

Failing in this, he was condemned to hold it open with his left hand and fill it as best he could with his right.

He succeeded finely in this way as long as the coins were in mass, but when it came to the last few hundred scattered loose, ah! then the real trouble began. Every coin had to be picked up. His task-master saw to that. To leave one single golden coin ungathered was a physical impossibility, and it was during the picking up of these that Haste kept crying to him "speed" and Imagination kept painting the awful labours still before him. Every last coin of all that cache had to be removed, for each of these terrible things had a power as great as the mass. Each was a sovereign or a louis.

Each represented four dollars or five dollars, and five dollars to Macquart, who had always known poverty, five dollars dressed in gold in the form of a sovereign, constituted a power against which there was no appeal.

He whimpered as he picked amongst the soil, whimpered like a woman in distress.

The heat of the day was great and the sun struck

heavy on him, all the time the sweat was pouring from him, and a thirst, tremendous as the thirst of fever, withered his soul.

Then, when the last coin was salved, he took the basket carefully by both handles, rose to his feet and lifted it.

He had intended to fill both baskets, but he had completely forgotten this intention, and indeed the present load was as much as he could carry—almost more than he could carry.

He had got halfway between the cache and the lagoon bank when one of the handles of the basket broke, the basket swung over and a torrent of coin fell with a noise like the rush of rain amidst the leaves and grass.

A faint jingle told of coin striking coin, then nothing could be heard but the crying of the parrots in the trees and the wind stirring the branches.

Macquart carefully seized the basket by the edge on the side of the broken handle so that no more of the contents could escape, then he placed the basket by a tree trunk, then he proceeded to hunt for the lost treasure. He seemed quite unmoved by this disaster, but in reality he was stunned. It is not the weight that makes the last straw figure as the last straw, it is the psychological moment. This accident, that would have made Macquart swear earlier in the day, now made him dumb.

Then, with what seemed a terrible patience, he went down on his knees and began to collect the coins. He stripped away the long leaves as well as he could and the ground vines. Here and there

he could see the faint glint of a metal disc and wherever he saw one he pounced. The light was not very strong, on account of the foliage above, yet it was sufficient for his purpose.

And now as he laboured on hands and knees, rooting about like an animal, movements in the branches above became apparent and twenty little faces, some upside down, could be seen watching the worker with an earnestness ludicrous, yet somehow horrible.

A monkey is a grin when it is not a grimace, and nothing can be imagined further removed from honest mirth than these incarnations of laughter—nothing certainly than these little faces amidst the leaves looking down at Macquart.

Then one of them plucked a big, squashy-looking fruit from one of the branches and flung it.

It hit Macquart in the small of the back and he sprang to his feet with a yell. The blow had been a sharp one, and coming unexpectedly there, where he fancied himself alone, the shock had badly upset his nerves.

He glanced wildly about him. Then he saw his tormentors and shook his fist at them.

His outcry had startled them, but they recognised at once that he was unarmed; they knew that he was angry and that they were the cause of his anger and they knew that he was impotent and the knowledge of all this filled them with joy.

They pelted him now with little nuts whilst, pretending to ignore them, he went on his hands and knees again. As he worked, he placed the recovered coins in the side pocket of his coat. Then, as he

worked, something that was not a nut hit him on the brim of the hat which he had pushed back to save his neck—bounced over his shoulder and struck a broad leaf in front of him. It was a gold coin.

He had made a great mistake in placing the basket by the tree trunk, for there was an air shoot hanging by the tree and, sliding down the air shoot, one of the monkey folk had captured the basket and its contents, spilling most of them on the way up.

But there was enough left for ammunition, and Macquart, looking up, got a fistful of sovereigns in his face. He turned, saw that the basket was gone and then, forgetting that he was a man, with a howl of a wolf began to climb the tree that was nearest to him. As he climbed he shouted and swore at the creatures skipping above him, and the higher he climbed the higher they went.

Then suddenly the branch he was climbing by broke and he fell, the next branch caught him, but only for a moment, before it snapped under his weight, delivering him over to the branch immediately below.

He clung to it, swinging by his hands twenty feet above the ground.

The monkeys above, enraptured at this fine game that had been suddenly provided for them, pelted him, but he did not heed.

He did not know how far the ground was beneath him; he felt that he was at an enormous height in the air and that to fall would be sure death. He clung. He tried to work his way along the branch towards the bole; it was impossible; to do

so he would have been forced to hang by one hand at a time and that was beyond his strength; besides, the branch had bowed beneath his weight. He knew that he could not go on clinging forever, that the fall must come certain and soon, yet his mind found room for fantastic thoughts. It seemed to him that the forest was in a conspiracy with John Lant against him. Trees, monkeys, leaves, vines, lianas and birds, all were "setting on" him to rob him of his life; he saw himself swinging there, pelted by monkeys; the picture came to him as though it were the picture of another man. Then cramp seized him and he fell.

The fall, so far from killing him, did not even break a bone, but he was half stunned, and he sat for a while with his hands to his head, whilst the world rocked and reeled beneath him and the monkeys, who had descended limb by limb, pelted him and jibed at him as if to shew the boundless and tireless malignity that life can tap through its creatures.

Then, after a while, Macquart rose up. He stood for a moment as if undecided and then made off back towards the cache. He went half running, half stumbling, talking and muttering to himself in a crazy sort of way, defeated, beaten, yet still led by the gold that was destroying him. At the edge of the cache he sat down and began digging with his hands. He had brought the other basket up close beside him and as he burst another gold box open he began filling the basket, but his half-crazy mind was now so obsessed by the idea of the basket breaking that he did not load it with more than five

handfuls of coin and earth, for there was no thought now of sifting the coin from earth or earth from coin, only the overwhelming and overmastering thought of speed.

Then, with a load that a child could have carried, he started off at a trot for the lagoon edge, discharged his burden into the fo'c'sle of the yawl and returned.

So it went on, and when the sun sank and the stars broke out above he was still running, whimpering like a child who is late on errand and fears a beating, heedless of the rushing monkeys that flitted above him like a breeze in the foliage, heedless of everything except the vast labour on which he was engaged—for he was not carrying gold now in his basket, but earth under the belief that he had to empty the whole world into the fo'c'sle of the *Barracuda*.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PIT TRAP

SAJI, when he parted from Chaya after having seen Macquart and his party vanish in the thorn maze, made back for the river at a trot.

It was a nine or ten hours' journey from the river to the thorn, for Europeans cumbered with luggage. The return journey took Saji slightly over four hours. The runner who brought the news from Marathon to Athens would have had little chance in a long-distance race against Saji.

Like a centipede, this man seemed to have a hundred pairs of legs at his service to be used a pair at a time, so that he might run forever, or at least till all were worn out; his lungs were practically inexhaustible.

It was towards ten o'clock when he reached the Dyak village, and there under the stars he met the old woman who was waiting for news.

He told her everything.

"So," said she, "he has led them into the thorn city; that means he will come back, he and the other one; he will lead him to the hiding-place or he will destroy him before they get there. Now is your time to strike, but not till you have marked down the hiding-place."

Saji nodded.

"Where is Chaya?" asked the woman.

"She is following after," said Saji. "I came swiftly."

The old woman went to the hut where she lived and returned with something in her hands. It was a parang, a Dyak knife in a leather sheath. She held it out to Saji, but he shewed her that he was already possessed of one, taking it from his girdle and holding it before her in the starlight.

"Give it to me and take this," said she. "It belonged to Lant; it will know what is to be done and lead you."

Saji took the parang and placed it in his girdle. Then, with another word or two to the old woman, he started off through the trees. By the river bank he took up his position amongst the bushes at a point that gave him a good view of Wiart's house and the landing-stage, then he squatted down to wait and watch.

He was watching chiefly by means of his ears; his eyes told him little of what was going on around him beyond the span of river bank where the house stood. His ears told him much. He could hear the river, a sound made up of a thousand little sounds, from the weak voice of the water washing bank and tree roots and landing-stage, to the splash of fish jumping in the distance. The smell of the river came with its voice, a smell of damp and decay, mixed with the musky perfume of river mud.

Then, on the other hand, he could hear the voices

of the forest, swept by the night wind. Hour after hour passed without lessening in the slightest the deadly vigilance of the watcher. He was thinking of Chaya. The success of this hunt would bring him Chaya. When he presented her with the gift of gifts she would be his. The old woman had said so. Chaya despised him as a monkey-slayer, she looked on him as a boy. When he proved himself a man in her eyes all would be different.

Then, of a sudden, thought fled from him, and, feeling for the Punan stabbing spear at his side, he bent forward and remained rigid as a drawn bow. They were coming. He watched them as they parted, Wiart going to the house for his gun and Macquart going to the tent. Then they appeared again, coming along down to the landing-stage, Macquart leading the way, Jacky and Wiart following.

They were going to take to the boat, and once they were off it would be a simple business to follow them in the canoe.

He watched them arranging the boat, then he saw Macquart going towards the canoe. The boat pushed off and the canoe followed it.

Then Saji, with a wildly bounding heart, saw that he had been tricked. These men whom he despised in his soul had been cleverer than he. Never for a moment had he dreamed that the canoe was in danger, never for a moment had he fancied that their suspicions would have been raised against him. And now he found himself checkmated, rendered impotent, tricked, and put out of the game.

He sprang up amongst the bushes, then he sank

back again. To follow was impossible, to shew himself or call out might only lead to a shot from that rifle Wiart could use so well.

He watched the boat vanish round the river bend, then he fell to thinking.

There was not another canoe on the river, all the fishing Dyaks were at sea. The river was no use, so he dismissed it from his mind; the only road he could take was the river bank and he did not know the road in the least.

He knew the forest, but he had never hunted along the river bank, though his hunts had sometimes brought him out on the river-side. However, want of knowledge of this strip of the forest did not stay him in the least. The river would be his guide and, picking up his spear, he started.

He did not know in the least where the boat was making for, he only knew that it had gone down stream and down stream he made his way.

The road was easy at first, but presently it became bad, squashy and overgrown with mangroves. The mangrove root seems made by Nature as a trap for the foot, but Saji seemed to have eyes in his feet and he did not trip. He passed over this difficult ground as swiftly as through the easy parts of the forest, passed the belt of nipah palms that bordered it, and struck in to the region of cutch and camphor trees that lay beyond, always keeping in view the river on his right.

Beyond the camphor trees came very easy ground. In the old days, when certain animals were more frequently met with in this part of the forest, they

would come down to drink at the river just here, and this fact was to weave itself into the texture of the story of Macquart in a most unexpected manner.

Saji had not made twenty yards across this easy ground when the earth gave under his feet. He made a wild effort to save himself, failed, fell into the darkness, and lay half stunned for a moment and half smothered by the rush of earth and rubble that had followed him.

He had fallen into a pit trap dug in the old days. A bottle-shaped cellar in the earth covered over with laths and clay and growing plants. The laths made of split bamboo had decayed long ago, but the fine roots of the plants held the clay together; it had consolidated and hardened, making a cellar top capable of sustaining the weight of a small animal, but not the weight of a man.

In the old days the bottom of the pit had been dressed with sharp bamboo stakes, points upwards. Fortunately for Saji time had rotted these to dust.

He lay for a moment, then he sat up. He knew at once what had happened to him and the knowledge restored his faculties like a stimulant. Looking up, he could see above the faint light that indicated the ragged opening through which he had fallen. Then he rose to his feet and began exploring his prison with his hands held flat, palms against the walls.

He was not long in discovering the exact shape of the trap, which was that of an inverted funnel. Having obtained this fact, he explored the texture of the walls.

Rain had never come in here, the earth covering and more especially the leaf covering of the roof, coupled with the fact that the roof formed part of the gentle shelve of the bank to the river, had kept the place dry, and the walls were of hard earth, but not so hard as to be proof against the point of his spear.

He had been carrying it aslant over his shoulder when he fell and he had not released his hold on it. It was the first thing he touched when recovering his full consciousness.

Having explored the texture of the walls, he turned to the question of the depth of the trap. By standing on tiptoe he could just touch the foliage on the borders of the hole in the roof with the spear point.

Having obtained all these facts, he crouched down on the floor of his prison to grapple with them.

It was a terrible problem. No less than the problem of escape from the interior of an inverted funnel whose walls were of hard earth.

For a long time he crouched wrestling with it. Whoever had devised this trap must, in carrying out his plan, have expended no little time and energy. The earth must have been drawn up in basketfuls, the delvers carefully broadening the base at the risk of an infalling of the walls. But the labours of the making of it were nothing to the labours of Saji wrestling with the result.

Unable to hit upon any means in the least feasible, he suddenly rose to his feet; as he did so some-

thing touched him on his shoulder. It was the end of a ground liana that had been brought down by the spear head when he had explored the opening with it. The liana hung down like a rope; it was half an inch thick. It was salvation.

Inverting the spear and pushing the point into the furthest recess of the pit, he managed to seize the butt with his teeth, so as to bring it up with him. Even in the overwhelming joy of finding an easy and rapid means of escape, he did not forget for a moment the necessity of taking the weapon with him.

It was impossible to climb with it in his hands, and even now, holding the extreme end of the butt in his teeth, he had to keep his head bent with his chin on his chest as he climbed. This made the process more laborious and more lengthy; it produced all sorts of extra vibrations in the rope of liana; it was his undoing. His uppermost hand had reached within a foot of the opening when the liana broke.

Instantly he must have—so to speak—spat out the spear butt, else it would have been driven through the roof of his mouth. As it was, he found himself lying on the floor of his prison with the spear across him.

He was shaken, but quite unhurt, and the fall, instead of demoralising him, set him to wrestling again with the problem he had so nearly solved. Saji had fine qualities amongst his many defects, and the finest of them was patience under defeat, and steadfastness. The sea and the forest had educated these natural qualities inherited from those ancestors

of his, who had tracked and trapped and fished since the beginning of time, ambushed their enemies after weeks of patient watching and secured their heads just as Saji hoped to secure the head of Macquart.

That was the gift which would bring him Chaya, and, much as he valued life, that was the object for which he was striving now.

Though he had no enmity against Macquart, the head of Macquart held him to its capture with a grasp stronger than the love of life.

Saji had no enmity towards the animals he followed in the forest or the fish he followed in the sea, yet the pursuit of fish or beast life was nothing compared to the object of the chase. His busy mind, working now with the activity of a squirrel in a cage, suddenly struck upon a new idea.

He began to attack the walls of his prison. Going down on his knees and with his spear point, he began digging away at the clay as though endeavouring to make the beginnings of a tunnel. Nothing was further from his thoughts than a tunnel. He was digging to bring down earth.

If he could bring down sufficient to make a pile high enough to allow him to stand on it and grasp the vegetation at the opening, he fancied that he could save himself. Had the pit been flooded with the cold, practical light of day, I doubt if he would have attempted the business.

He worked with the spear point, and then, like a digging animal, with his hands. He worked constantly and methodically; he worked through the remainder of the night, through the dawn, and on

into the day. Then he rested for some hours, and recommenced working through the evening. Before night fell, he had brought enough clay out of the pit side to make a mound three feet high in the centre. A tremendous amount considering the stiffness of the earth, and the fact that the higher the mound was built the broader spread its base. For every inch of altitude he had to broaden and thicken the base of this infernal mound. As a matter of fact, to escape by this way it would be necessary to fill the whole pit with clay. To come up on a rising tide of clay! The thing was impossible. His labour had given him employment which, after liberty, is the best gift a prisoner can receive, but that was all.

Now, with the darkness, he knew that he was lost, that all the digging he could do would not save him, and knowing that he sat down to die. Saji had a terrible philosophy of his own. Whilst capable of endless effort, he was a fatalist pure and simple when faced with the impossible or the inevitable.

He did not moan to himself or curse his lot. He had to die—well, then, he had to die and there was no more to be said on the matter. He did not think, as he sat there, of all the pleasant days and good times he would never see again, simply because such things were not for him. Blue skies to Saji were no more than blue skies to an India-rubber figure; sunshine was good because it warmed him and for no other reason. When it warmed him too much it was bad. Freedom was good because it allowed him to move about and kill things. Food was good because it filled his stomach and satisfied

his desire for food. He had neither sunshine, freedom, nor food here, but presently he would not need them.

His mind retired into itself, folded up, almost ceased to exercise its functions.

Long after dark, how long he could not possibly tell, Saji, seated in the darkness of his terrible prison, suddenly came to life and sprang erect with a shout.

The sound of voices had come to him. Voices of human beings passing close to the pit mouth.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEMESIS

WHEN Hull and his companions reached the landing-stage and found the boat—as they expected—gone, they struck at once down stream, taking the exact path taken by Saji.

You will observe that mechanism which Fate often displays in the fact that Macquart, in stealing the boat and so making his own position seemingly more secure, had, in reality, provided a release for the death that was pursuing him in the form of Saji and which was trapped and held up in the pit.

The party, passing along the river bank and hearing the call for help, stopped, made a search, discovered the trap mouth and soon had the prisoner out.

“Why, it’s one of those blessed Dyaks,” said Hull, “caught huntin’ in his own trap.”

Houghton said nothing. He was looking at Chaya, who had gone up to Saji. Saji was standing feeling his joints and taking deep breaths of air, and Chaya was talking to him.

“He wishes for food,” said she to the others, “and to go with us; his canoe has been taken from him. He would get it back.”

Hull had some biscuits in his pocket, which he produced, and Saji, after a rush to the river bank for a drink, joined in with the others. His strength and life had completely returned to him, and at the suggestion of Chaya, he took the lead, being a better woodsman than any of the rest with the exception, perhaps, of herself. He had saved his spear. Even in the excitement of release he had not forgotten that, and he marched now ahead of them with the spear across his shoulder, leading the way, and piloting them much more quickly than if they had gone without him. Chaya and Houghton came last.

"He is full of danger and he must not see us together," murmured Chaya, whose hand Houghton was holding for a moment. "If he were to hear *that*, he would try to kill you."

"Let him," said Houghton, laughing, but she released her hand. She seemed full of fear of Saji, not for herself but for Houghton. Saji, however, had no eyes for anything but the road before him. Almost quicker than they could follow him, he went ahead so that dawn had little more than touched the skies above the tree-tops when they reached the lagoon bank.

The first thing they saw was the *Barracuda* moored to the opposite bank, with the whole width of the lagoon between themselves and it. The *Barracuda's* boat was tied up beside the yawl. Not a sign was to be seen of Macquart or his companions.

"Will you look at what the swabs have done?" cried Hull. "How in the nation are we to get across?"

"Thank God, the yawl's not gone," said Houghton. "That's the main point. We'll get across somehow. Let's think."

Even as he spoke, in the vague light that was now filling the world, they saw a figure emerging from the trees on the opposite bank. It was Macquart. He was carrying something in his hand. They saw him board the yawl.

"He's carrying a basket," said Tillman. "Look at him! He's emptying it down the fo'c'sle hatch. By God, he's found the cache and that's the stuff he's emptying into the *Barracuda*."

"Looks like it," said Hull, who was standing now on one foot and now on the other. "Oh, the swab! To see him and not be able to get me fingers in his hair. Come, boys, it's round the lagoon or nothing. There ain't no use in trying to swim, for the place is sure full of sharks. It's a fifteen-mile tramp, but we'll do it."

But Saji, who had been talking to Chaya, solved the difficulty in a quicker way. Plunging into the water and still carrying his spear, he struck out for the opposite bank. There were sharks here surely, but Saji had no fear of sharks. He had often swum amongst them. The Grey Nurse is the only shark really to be feared by the swimmer who takes care to beat the water as he goes, and there were none of these ferocious species in the lagoon or lower reaches of the river. Sydney Harbour seems to be their chief naval base and, though they cruise about the Pacific islands, they seem to give the New Guinea coast a wide berth.

They saw Macquart make off again among the trees with his basket; he evidently had not seen them, and then they saw Saji unmoor the boat. He brought it back, sculling it from the stern, and they crowded into her and in less than five minutes they were on the deck of the yawl. Hull made a dart for the fo'c'sle hatch and tumbled down it; then they heard him striking a match and then came his voice.

"Lord bless my soul! The blighter's been fillin' her with clay——" Then a wild yell. "Suverins—suverins!" Silence and another match being struck. "There's suverins all scattered on the clay." He came tumbling up, his face blazing in the now strong daylight, and in one broad hand, which he opened wide, two sovereigns and some earth.

"Did you ever see the like of that?" he cried. "Half a ton of clay the swab has shovelled aboard her with suverins all scattered on it. Where's the sense in that? What's he been doin'? Has he struck the cache or has he hasn't? Look out, here he comes!"

Macquart broke cover from the trees as he spoke, basket in hand and half running. He saw the men on the deck of the yawl, but did not notice them in the least. On board he came, brushed them aside, rushed to the fo'c'sle hatch and emptied his basket.

They stood horrified. Macquart was no longer a man, though retaining a man's image. He seemed like a beast in the last stages of pursuit. The saliva ran from the corners of his mouth, his breath came in sobs and sighs, his face was grey-brown as the

earth he was carrying, and it was evident, now, that, although he did not recognise them in the least, he saw them as figures, for he avoided them as, empty basket in hand, he made again for the shore.

Just as his foot touched the bank, Saji, who had landed, seized him by the arm. The effect was instantaneous and extraordinary. Macquart's mind, or what was left of it, dropped the idea that was fixed in it and seized upon the idea that he was being pursued and seized. With a movement swift as light he freed himself and dashed off among the trees, with the Dyak in pursuit.

"Now we're done proper!" cried Hull. "Cuss that nigger! If he'd left that chap alone, we could have followed him to the cache."

"We'll find it without him," said Tillman. "It can't be far. Follow me, you chaps. See, there's his marks. Why, dash it, he's made a regular road."

They had landed, and, following Tillman, they made along Macquart's tracks. Tillman was right. Macquart, in those endless journeys to and fro, had left a road. Trodden-down leaves and plants, broken lianas, spilt earth gave indications that required no skill in tracking to follow, and when they reached the cache everything was plain.

A burst gold-box lay exposing its contents to the now risen sun. Macquart had not touched it. Earth and gold were all the same to him. He who had to empty the world into the fo'c'sle of the yawl against time had no time to bother with trifles

just as the treasure-seekers now had no time to bother about him.

Hull, after the first shout of discovery, had cast himself down on his stomach and, now laughing like a madman, was playing with the contents of the box, laving those tattooed hands of his in money. Tillman, absolutely crazed, was dancing like a monkey in the sunlight before Hull. Houghton alone held himself together. Chaya was there. As full of mad excitement and joy as his companions, the check of the woman, who was looking wonderingly on at the antics of the others, held him from any demonstration. He only laughed; then, turning to Chaya, who was laughing also, he seized her to him. She did not resist. They were as much alone as though the frantic Hull and Tillman were miles away. They were screened by the gold.

Then Hull came to his senses and began to talk almost rationally, sitting up and punctuating his remarks with blows of his fist on the ground.

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!" cried Hull. "To think of poor old Mac gone cracked and shovellin' dirt and leavin' the yellow boys!"

It was indicative of the Captain's mentality that all anger against Macquart had vanished to be replaced by furious mirth at the tragedy that Fate had shown to them.

"Man and boy, I've worked all me life for tuppence and look at this. Look at me now, and Mac tried to fitcher me over the business and look at Mac! I tell you, it had to come. I felt them suverins drawing me all me life and there they are.

I wasn't born to die pore. I was not. And now I'll sit in me kerridge and live as I ought. That's me. Me sittin' on the top of the keg and smokin' me pipe, and Mac runnin' mad in the woods chased by niggers."

Tillman, recovering, was also in a talkative mood.

"We've struck it in the middle of the bull's-eye," said he, "and no mistake. That's what pleases me. We aimed for it and hit it. If we'd tumbled on this thing by chance there wouldn't have been anything to it, but we've got it by going for it. Well, it's champagne for all of us forevermore. Amen!"

"It's big luck," said Houghton, who was standing by Chaya. "But there's one thing that bothers me. Where are Wiart and Jacky?"

"That needn't worry you," grunted Hull, who was tossing coins on his thumb. "Mac's done 'em in as sure as I haven't. Went mad and done 'em in. Here we come and find him mad and them gone—done 'em in—that's what he's done. He'd 'a' spifflicated his own grandmother for half a ha' penny, would Mac, and here he was, alone with the nigger and old whiskers *and* half a million pounds."

"It looks like it," said Tillman. "Well, there's no use in talking about it. I'm longing to get this stuff under cover. You see the way the ground has been picked up; that was when they were hunting to strike the cache. This is the only spot where real digging work was done and they didn't do much of that. They hadn't more than struck the colour when the quarrel took place or Mac killed

them. Come on, now, and collect the dibbs and let's hunt for the rest."

Tillman had picked up the basket that Macquart dropped in his flight and they proceeded carefully to fill it with the gold in sight, a business that did not take three pairs of hands long in accomplishing, whilst Chaya held the basket open. Then they set to and in a moment located the next gold box.

"They are set side by side," said Houghton. "We won't have a bit of trouble with them, only we will want baskets. I vote we get back to the *Barracuda* with this lot and then rig up something to carry the stuff in. A piece of sail-cloth will do at a pinch."

The others fell in with this idea. But just at the start Hull raised an objection.

"I don't like to leave this stuff alone with no one to look after it, and that's the truth," said he. "I ain't a narvous man, but it gets me on the spine when I think of leavin' this stuff to its lonesome."

"There's no one to touch it," said Tillman.

"Maybe not," replied the Captain, "but, all the same, I'm no happier to leave it."

"I'll stay and look after it," said Houghton. "Chaya and I will sit tight here while you two get aboard and bring back the canvas."

"I'll be easier that way," said the Captain.

He started off with Tillman and they carried the basket alternately till they reached the deck of the yawl.

"We'll stow it in the saloon as far as there's stowage room," said Hull, "and the hold will take

the rest. Dash me! if I like stowin' it anywhere. I'd sooner keep it on deck under me eye, but that's not to be done." He lowered himself down the saloon hatch, and Tillman was preparing to follow with the load when a shout from Hull down below made him start. He put the basket down on deck and the next moment he was in the cabin. Hull was standing by the body of Jacky stretched on the floor.

"Good God!" said Tillman.

"Dead," said Hull, lifting an arm of the corpse and letting it drop. "Neck broken to all appearances. Done in by Mac. What did I tell you?"

Tillman was too shocked for a moment to speak.

"How he did it, Lord only knows," said Hull, who was now as cool as a professor of anatomy demonstrating on a "subject." "There ain't no scratch that I can see. There ain't no blood, just the neck broke. He *may* have tumbled down the saloon hatch and killed hisself, but that ain't probable with Mac about. Most like he was done in by Mac and the whisker man and then the whiskers got his gruel later on. No knowin'. But he's got to get out of here, and we've got to shift him. We've got to rig a tackle to the main boom and histe him. Let's get to work."

They rigged the tackle and ten minutes' gruesome work got rid of the intruder. He went overboard with a pig of iron as a sinker and the Captain, quite unmoved, assisted in the removing of the tackle and the rousting out of some spare canvas to serve as a sack for the carrying of the gold.

CHAPTER XXX

THE GIFT OF GIFTS

H OUGHTON, left alone with Chaya, took his seat by the cache whilst the girl sat beside him. If ever any man realised his ambitions in life, that man was surely Houghton. The one woman in the world that he wanted sat beside him, all the money he required lay before him.

"Chaya," said he, pointing to the cache, "that is what we came here for. We have got it and we must now go away. Will you come with me?"

Chaya laughed softly to herself. The woman they called her mother had no more hold upon her affection than Macquart. She had absolutely never known the thing called love till Houghton came into her life. She opened out her hands as though running over in imagination the whole earth, turned to him, laughed into his eyes and held up her lips.

"That is well," said he. He held her hand and they sat shoulder touching shoulder, not troubling to speak.

All at once Chaya started and turned her head, whilst Houghton rose to his feet. A voice from far away to the right came to them through the almost windless air. It seemed hailing them.

"It is Saji," said Chaya, who had often heard

that hail on their hunting expeditions. "He is calling to me." She knew by the sound of the voice that Saji was either injured or in distress. She answered the call and the reply came as faithfully as an echo.

"Now he will know," said Chaya, "and he will come here as surely as the snake to its rock." They listened, but no sound came from Saji. That wily hunter, having obtained their direction, was using his breath, no doubt, for a better purpose than shouting.

Then they heard him moving among the leaves, and a moment later he appeared from among the trees. He was crawling on hands and knees. He held the parang between his teeth, for his girdle had been torn off in some violent struggle. He was mortally wounded and he was dragging along the head of Macquart by its hair. When he saw Chaya he cried out, and, supporting himself on his left hand as she approached, he held up the head with his right.

It was the gift of gifts, the love-offering of the Dyak warrior. It was more than that. It was the head of the man who had murdered Chaya's father.

Chaya did not know this, nor did Houghton, nor did Saji. All these actors in the drama were perfectly unconscious of the fact that here Justice was dealing retribution, that here, above the gold for which Macquart had murdered Lant, Macquart's head was being offered as a gift to Lant's daughter.

Houghton cried out in horror, but Chaya, just as on the day when she stood watching the battle be-

tween the scorpion and the centipede, stood looking at Saji and his terrible trophy unmoved. She knew that it was his offering to her, and her love for Houghton had told her in some mysterious way the secret of Saji's passion for her. It was as though she were watching not only the savagery from which she was escaping, but the whole of that mysterious past which lay on her mother's side, stretching through unknown ages during which men, to gain the love of women, had brought them as love gifts the heads of men.

Saji, with one supreme effort, tried to rise to his feet; then he fell on his knees, on his hands, on his side, quivered as though a breeze were astir amidst his muscles and lay dead beside his trophy. As he turned on his side they saw the cause of his death. The shaft of his own spear, broken off, protruded from his side. Macquart, in his struggle for life, must have gained possession of the spear and used it with deadly effect, only to fall victim to the parang.

Houghton was advancing towards the body of Saji when Hull and Tillman appeared from among the trees, carrying the canvas for the conveying of the gold.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT LAST

IT was the morning of the fifth day after the death of Saji, and Hull and his companions were stretched on the deck of the *Barracuda* in the shade of the trees, smoking and talking. Seldom have men worked as those three during the last few days. Not only had they got the last of the coin on board, but they had proved to themselves the fact by digging up the last possible vestiges of the cache. They had got a good deal of the rubbish out of the fo'c'sle and flung it overboard after sifting it and now the boat was all trim and ready for sea.

Pig-iron ballast had been jettisoned to be replaced by gold. The gold was stored in the cabin, in the hold and in the fo'c'sle. They had worked surrounded by an aura. The thing was fabulous and the labour like the labour in a dream. Nearly under them lay the bones of the *Terschelling*, the ship that had been taking all this wealth to China ports more than fifteen years ago. Its non-arrival had, no doubt, affected underwriters, caused talk, caused loss to the insurers of it, and then had been absolutely forgotten. Here it had lain dead and buried to all seeming, but its soul had been actively

at work, weaving, weaving, weaving, drawing lives together like threads to make the texture of the pictures that form this story.

It had drawn to itself Hull and Houghton and Tillman, Macquart and Jacky, Wiart, Chaya, Screed, and, strangest of all, it had brought up the past and dealt out retribution to the wicked. Who will say that gold is a lifeless thing or that it is not in its way a god? Now stored and prisoned, and about to be deported to a land where its activities could begin anew, it shewed nothing of its presence except in the weariness of its slaves who were lying about on deck.

Chaya was down below in the cabin, arranging things. When Hull and Tillman got the truth of the matter, they had made no trouble at all about Chaya, though her joining them would make things a great deal more difficult on the return journey. It was arranged that she should have the cabin for herself to sleep in, and during the day, except at meal-times, the rest of the crew being condemned to the fo'c'sle. Not that this mattered much, as the crew, being so small, would be required most of the time on deck.

The incident of Chaya scarcely gave Hull and Tillman a thought. Gold fever and heavy labour held their entire minds and beings, and it was perhaps the exhaustion produced by these two causes that moved Hull, as he lay on the deck now, smoking and stretching himself, to forecast the difficulties still before them.

"There's a good many miles of sea between here

and there," said he, "but I don't mind nothin' so long as we get clear of the coast. I wish we was out of this lagoon."

"What's wrong with the lagoon?" said Tillman. "It's been a pretty good friend to us, I think."

"I don't know anythin' that's wrong with it," replied Hull, "but I wish we was clear of it."

"Well, we'll be out of it to-morrow," said Houghton. "We have only to get the water on board and we can do that this evening. We couldn't go sooner than to-morrow. Lord! every bone in my body is aching. I didn't ever think I could have worked like that. Do you know, we have been at it for five days without a break scarcely?"

"Seems more like five years," said Tillman. He had risen up and was leaning on the rail tapping the ashes from his pipe into the lagoon. Whilst engaged in this his eye caught sight of something. It was the prow of a fishing prahu. At this moment Chaya came on deck and her quick eye caught sight of the prahu. She called out to Houghton, and he and Hull sprang to their feet.

The prahu that had come up the lagoon at a rapid pace turned in a hairpin curve, with the foam pouring like cream round the blades of the star-board paddles, and vanished as it had come almost in an instant.

"That was smartly done," said Tillman. "Those chaps must have come to have a peep at us. I wonder how they knew we were here."

"I reckon they didn't," said Hull. "They just struck sight of us and got skeered." But Hough-

ton, who had been talking to Chaya, was not of this way of thinking.

"I don't like the look of those chaps," said he; "neither does Chaya. She thinks they must have got wind of what we are after and they've seen her. That old woman who calls herself her mother is sure to have raised the tribe when Chaya did not go back. It's nearly a week now since she joined us and she thinks that the fishermen of the tribe have come up from the sea to the village, got news of what has happened and started out after us."

"That's cheerful," said Tillman.

"I said just now I wished we were out of this lagoon," grumbled Hull.

"Chaya thinks that the fact of her being with us may have caused the trouble," went on Houghton, "and she says, rather than endanger you two and the gold, she is ready to go back. I would go with her."

"Now, we don't want any of that sort of stuff," said Hull. "We've contracted to lift the girl as well as the stuff and we're not goin' to be done over our contrack by those chaps."

"We've got our rifles," said Tillman.

"Blow rifles!" said the Captain. "Sticks is good enough to beat them off with." He went down below and got an axe, then with the axe in his hand he lumbered over the side and disappeared into the forest.

In half an hour's time he returned. He had cut down and cut up three small trees, and he carried the result of his labours under his arm in the form

of three cudgels, each four feet long. Down he sat on the deck and, as he whittled at the weapons with his knife, he laid down the law of self-defence by means of sticks to the others.

"I'll larn you somethin'," said the Captain. "Don't you never try to belt a chap over the head with a stick till you have him on the ground. The p'int of the stick is the able end for fightin'. Use it like a bay'net. There's not a man livin' can stand up to the poke of a stick if the chap that's usin' the stick knows his bizness. Now these sticks is short enough to fend or break a spear with and long enough to dig a nigger in the stomach with. That's the p'int to aim at."

He spent nearly half the day over these weapons, and at sundown they started to water the *Barracuda*, Houghton and Tillman taking the beakers to the well they had found just inside the forest, whilst Hull and Chaya kept guard.

They slept that night on deck, keeping watch in turn. But not a sign came of any trouble from the river.

Then just before dawn they unmoored, and the Captain with Tillman got out the boat and hauled the *Barracuda* out. They towed her to the mouth of the river where the wind, setting from the land fortunately for them, was ruffling up the lagoon water. Here they got the boat on board and hoisted the mainsail and jib, whilst the *Barracuda*, beginning to walk and talk, nosed her way into the river mists now breaking and making spirals to the wind.

The tide was ebbing, and as they drew along past wooded capes and deep dense masses of mangrove growth, Hull, who was on the lookout, saw on the calm dawn-lit sea just at the river mouth vague forms like water flies come to rest on the ruffled water.

"That's them," said he. "Look, they're waitin' for us. Now, you take my orders and take 'em sharp. We're makin' five knots, we must make nine; crack every stitch of canvas on her and give me the wheel."

He took the wheel whilst the others flew to obey his orders, and the *Barracuda*, with all sail set and the main boom swung out to starboard, came along at a spanking pace before the wind that was bending the palm tops and spreading before them in cat's-paws of vaguest silver. The rifles, loaded and ready, were lying on the deck to be used as a last resort. Chaya was kneeling by Houghton ready to hand him his weapon, and Tillman with his foot on his gun and his club in his fist was standing by Hull. Houghton could hear the sound of the sea coming against the wind. Never in his life had he gone through moments of such supreme tension as now, waiting for what might come in the vague light of morning and a silence unbroken but for the wash of the waves on the distant reefs and the wash of the water at the bow of the yawl.

Then suddenly uprose a clamour like the crying of sea-fowl. The ten prahus that had been lying like logs on the heave of the sea swarmed into a dark line and the line rushed to meet them. Houghton saw Hull as calm as though he were on a pleas-

ure sail, standing, quid bulging his cheek and great hands playing gently with the little wheel. Then suddenly the wheel went over to port and the *Barri-cuda* crashed into something that went grinding away under the keel. At the same moment something struck the main sail.

It was a light spear, venomous as the sting of a wasp, and it stuck there, slatting and held from falling back by its barb, whilst Hull put the wheel over again to starboard and twenty more spears fell "wop, wop" into the water astern of her.

"Done 'em," said the Captain.

Houghton looked back. He could not believe that it was all over. Yet there were the prahus all in confusion in the wake of the *Barracuda*, the wrecked prahu like a broken umbrella on the water, and the heads of the swimmers who were being rescued by their friends.

"They laid to get us one on each side," said Hull, "and if I hadn't shifted the helm and rammed that chap, they'd have got their holts—which they didn't. Well, there's no blood spilt and that's all the better. Gad! boys, we've got the stuff away!"

The sun answered him, breaking up over the sea, and all the great lonely coast they were leaving showed in its desolation across the water rippled with gold and strewn with the foam of the reefs.

Houghton, holding Chaya's hand, looked back. Then, still hand in hand, they went forward and stood looking far ahead to where the ruffled blue of the sea faded through the morning haze into a sky of azure, fair with the promise of the future.

CHAPTER XXXII

L'ENVOI

ONE bright morning, two months later, the *Bar-racuda*, having hung off and on all night in view of Macquarie, entered Sydney Harbour. Stole in unnoticed, storm-beaten, and sun-blistered, and foul with tropic weeds, the strangest craft that had ever made that port of call.

She and her crew, bronzed and tattered, and her cargo, invisible but there, might have sailed in from some distant Age when men made the world marvellous with their deeds and before machinery had made man commonplace as itself.

Chaya alone, sunburnt and laughing and amazed at the wonders of this new place, was a whole romance in herself.

Yet no one noticed them—or only some early fishermen and a few longshoremen at the little bay near Farm Cove where they anchored, and one of whom was sent hot foot with a message to Screed—a pencilled message which ran: “Big luck. Come at once, and for God’s sake bring some provisions with you.”

It would be impossible to describe that breakfast in the musty, fusty little cabin with the sun

blazing through the port-holes and the skylight. Wealth sat beside each of them, and the prosaic Screed, as he listened to scraps of the marvellous voyage, forgot even the gold he was sitting on in contemplation of the greater gold that lay like a halo around the work of these wanderers.

Chaya sat by Houghton—the only man among them doubly blessed by wealth.

THE END

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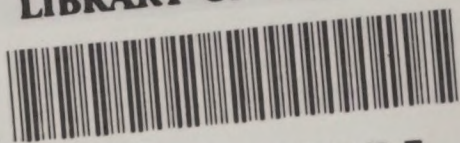
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